

THE
JAGIRDAR
OF
PALNA

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THE JAGIRDAR OF PALNA

5034 by

NALINI TURKHUDD

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BANGALORE CENTRE,
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Kumara Park (East), BANGALORE-1.



AN INDIAN GIRL'S TALE



FOREWORD

IT is always a pleasure and a privilege to discover a new talent, and, in the present case, I can say without any exaggeration that in Miss Nalini Turkhud I find a young, vigorous writer with no mean aptitude for story-writing. For an Indian it is not an easy matter to attempt to write a novel in English. Educated Indians can write an essay or a learned treatise on some serious subject with considerable ease and elegance but the domain of the English novel is an untrodden ground for them excepting some rare and brilliant exceptions. The chief difficulty which confronts an Indian in an attempt of this kind is his ignorance of colloquial, every-day English, which he cannot use with sufficient facility, unless he has passed some years in English society and in an English environment. What surprised me, therefore, was to find in the case of this little novelist that she has handled easy and colloquial English in a remarkably lucid style. It must be said that, in order to come out as a writer of some importance, it is necessary for the authoress to develop and build a style characteristic of herself, which will take considerable time and careful training; but, as a beginning, the little book which was entrusted to my care is a remarkable production, considering the age and attainments of the authoress.

The plot of the novel is well-chosen and from beginning to end is catching and never flags in in-

terest. A family, once rich and distinguished, suddenly becomes reduced in circumstances owing to the besetting sin of the time—gambling and speculation. The father and mother who are over-borne by the shock pass away in quick succession leaving two helpless children, nurtured in ease and affluence, to face penury and ruin and to shift for themselves as best as they could. The girl, Gouri Dutt, can be said to be the type of an Indian girl, although in intelligence above the average, and precocious in wisdom. A reserved sensitiveness; innate modesty and natural instinct to distinguish between good and evil without much effort, a courage, coupled as it is with the natural helplessness of girlhood, sometimes rising to heights which hold the readers spell-bound for the time being—these are some of the salient traits in the character of the heroine of this novel. The boy, being deprived unfortunately of the guidance and training of affectionate parents, turns out to be a wayward, pleasure-seeking and whimsical youth, and eventually meets a tragic fate on account of the inherent weakness of character which distinguishes him from his more fortunate sister.

The villain of the novel is also a type very much in evidence in a country like India—the son of a woman who worms herself in the favour of a big landlord and thereby succeeds in ousting his lawful wife and child, and raising her own son, who is not connected with the house either by blood or relationship, right from the gutter to a magnificent position as heir-apparent to a large estate. Either from bad

heredity or bad training, this boy, Chandrakant Gaekwad, develops an unscrupulous and vicious bent of character which, although softened and mollified by a becoming exterior and polished manners, gradually bears fruit in nefarious acts and culminates eventually in his tragic death. At the beginning he impresses the reader as a polished, cultured, young man who is anxious to oblige others and very likely to make use of his wealth for the benefit of the helpless and the destitute. As one goes on reading, however, one discovers that this is only a sham and a pretence to conceal and advance his detestable projects for the ruination of innocent girls and demoniacal indulgence in unbridled licentiousness. His treatment of Sushila marks him out as an utterly reckless and unscrupulous rascal who, with the help of his vast wealth and low intelligence, succeeds in entrapping innocent and unsuspecting girl victims in his deadly snare and sucks the blood out of them. It is this incident especially and his cowardly attempts to ensnare the heroine herself which mark him out as the villain of the piece who can easily compare in the intensity of light and shade with other villains similarly situated. His end, tragic though it is, fails to excite sympathy in the mind of the reader but is felt as a fitting retribution to his career of dissipation and debauchery.

The picture of Mai Saheb is also portrayed with no mean skill. A woman originally of the barber class, whom chance placed in the illustrious position of the mother of a Jagirdar, inspite of her affluent and

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distinguished surroundings, she still betrays her low origin and bad culture in the opening chapters of this book. She is a born intriguer, and with consummate cunning peculiar to her species, aided by luck, she secures entry into an illustrious family and ultimately causes deplorable complications, evicting the lawful wife and son to pass their lives as outcasts in obscurity and comparative penury. Her end also furnishes a parallel to that of her misguided son. What happens to her daughter is not worth recording as she naturally shares her mother's fortune in the first stage and latterly sinks into obscurity with her.

The opening scene, where Gouri Dutt is brought in contact with Mai Saheb and her satellites, is painted with considerable skill.

Dr. Dharendra (or Dhiren as he is called) is a high-souled, hard-working, intensely proud, somewhat reserved and moody, young man who bears the buffets of misfortune with a fortitude worthy of his high race. His mother also suffers her exile from lawful home and the consequent privation, in a way which can easily distinguish her as far above the masses—a high-born lady, who despises to cross swords even for the sake of her princely inheritance with a low-born woman. The apparent nonchalance with which this noble lady bears her downfall, trains up her son to a useful profession and watches his glorious career with the well-merited satisfaction of a loving mother, affords a touching picture. The relationship of the mother and son is not only cordial but is imbued with respect on one side and

well-restrained but deep affection on the other. The picture of Dhiren would have been much better had there been more light and colour thrown in it. To the casual reader he strikes as too sombre and depressing for a young man, however much he may have suffered on account of the vagaries of fortune. He seems to be devoid of any sense of humour which ought at times to have relieved the natural sternness and implacability of his character. I believe the authoress in her future attempts is bound to improve in her artistic achievements and her pictures will be grander and more beautiful than that of Dhiren who, although he is skilfully drawn, lacks the sprightly and softening element which can only be supplied by a keen sense of humour and general aptitude to feel and appreciate the lighter side of life.

Reading the novel through, I was very much impressed with one scene, which is depicted in Chapter XII of the book. It relates to the death apparition of Sushila — a spiritual visitation which is said to be a common occurrence in the psychic world. I have read of many instances of this kind in books of Theosophy and ghost-stories wherein death-bed and post-mortem apparitions have been described with a force of conviction which leave little doubt in the mind of the reader that they are not altogether the figments of imagination. This little scene is almost blood-curdling and leaves an ineffaceable effect on the mind of the reader. The tragic end of poor Sushila is befittingly capped with this thrilling incident

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which, I think, is a master-stroke, and Miss Nalini deserves to be congratulated on it.

To those who take delight in reading novels dealing with complex sex problems of the "Victoria Cross" type, this little story will, perhaps, appear a bit tame and devoid of the spicy side of life. At the present time we see a resurgence of a species of sexual psychology which very often deals out violent shocks to old-established and time-honoured ideas and ideals. The Victorian type of morality is not the fashion of the present-day story-writers. Novels of the Mrs. Henry Wood and Jane Austin type are rapidly getting out of date and giving place to books which can only be called pegs to hang on pet theories of the author regarding sex problems. People who are tired of the thralldom of old ideas and are craving for new thrills hanker after such literary productions. It is still too early to criticise this tendency and it may perhaps turn out that this merciless analysis of the present day sex relations might in due course be productive of a state of society wherein instances of glaring injustice and inequality between sex and sex may be minimised or adjusted on a sounder ethical basis. Whatever may be the ultimate result of this changing angle of vision, one thing is becoming certain that, unless there is a little twist in this direction, a novel writer cannot hope to sell his or her production to a very large extent. Miss Nalini has steered clear of everything that is iconoclastic and revolutionary in this respect and has staunchly adhered to the old, time-honoured ideas. Gouri Dutt

is the old, venerable type of Indian girlhood, and, although educated on the modern pattern, refuses to go ahead with the vanguard of European civilization and fondly clings to the old traditions. The fate of Sushila is meant to be a warning to all such as are disposed to defy the traditional sex law and succumb to temptations which ordinarily come in the way of beautiful and young girls.

On the whole, I may safely say that this little novel is worthy of a careful perusal and will not disappoint even a fastidious reader, if he or she remembers that it is the handiwork of a young girl still in her teens.

Bombay, }
1-4-1935. }

S. A. SUBNIS, B. A., LL. B.,
Solicitor

The Jagirdar of Palna.

CHAPTER I.

This is not going to be a regular autobiography. I shall only try to recall those moments which possess some degree of interest and shall therefore pass over the first fifteen years of my life in silence.

Our family, at that time, consisted of my brother Minanath and myself. During their life-time (eight years ago) our parents had been very prominent members of society as my father had once occupied the Mayoralty of Oona — but it is an age-long story and people had almost forgotten it.

My education was very poor but I was, with constant practice, able to read and write fairly well. Minanath, notwithstanding, great monetary difficulty, had graduated from the Prince Edward College.

Appearances are many a time deceptive as was the case with us, for, omitting the Rose Cottage and a rickety Ford car (we only were aware of), our condition was almost penniless. Minanath was on the lookout for a job but his efforts were always futile and every morning it was now our habit to scrutinize the "Times"—"Situations Vacant" columns. Then applications went, but never did the day dawn when a response came.

Friends, there had been many at that time when we had been able to entertain them; but ever since our pockets became empty, they had avoided us. Their attitude hurt me the more, because it came from those who had once prided themselves in the friendship of our parents. Though young in years, I had an unusual sense to understand and feel these things; may be that the days of hardship and struggle had matured my thoughts at such an early age.

Many a time I silently brooded over these things; they caused me unendurable pain, when my sole relief was to walk in the garden and allow my mind to dwell on some bright and happy vision: pleasant thoughts were forced; they rested and opened my inward mind to a panorama my imagination conjured up, of all that I desired most in this world and had not in my actual existence. You may call me a dreamer or a madcap; it is in vain to say that human beings ought to be satisfied with the little things they have; how can they when the fearful ghost of absolute hideous poverty confronts them every moment? It is alright for those who from their birth are brought up amidst indigent surroundings — to whom begging is a sort of act — a career; but what of those whose childhood has been spent in luxury and comfort? They can neither labour as the poor nor have they the means to self-respect their prestige in society.

Everybody cannot be lucky enough to enjoy luxuries and pleasures but one must have atleast the wherewithal to satisfy the little needs of daily life

just to keep him alive to his ordinary duties and responsibilities. Women's place is supposed to be in the kitchen only—in strict confinement,—but women feel as keenly as men do and it is narrow-mindedness of our more privileged fellow-creatures to callously scoff at their efforts to fight against circumstances and the inequities incidental to their life. Millions may be condemned to a deadlier doom than mine and many such must be in silent revolt against their lot. Luck endows some with wealth—worldly greatness but it also bestows on some, greater things, which money cannot buy and it is thoughtless of a man in a car to laugh and mock at those on foot, for they may be owners of some superior riches.

January, February and March had passed away. One April evening, Minanath returned home rather excited:

“Quick, Gouri!” he ejaculated “be dressed, the Jagirdarsahib of Palna is coming.”

“When?”

“Just now.”

I went to my chamber and dressed myself. It was not my habit to be careless about my looks; in fact I always liked to appear as best as I could. I was not endowed with perfect features nor had I a lily-white complexion and lovely rosy cheeks. I felt it a misfortune that I was so pale, thin, with features so irregular, but I had one comfort—that was my innocent, childish expression; This gave an almost beautiful look to my otherwise plain face. I brushed

my hair and having put everything ship-shape, I sallied forth to the drawing room.

It looked such a cosy place as the reddish glow of the sinking sun shone in between the window curtains and displayed to advantage the blue wall and carpeted floor. I passed from this (through the dining-room) into the back veranda which faced the kitchen and store-house; this veranda had trellis-work all round; it was covered by a bridal creeper. I felt so proud of the place—this was my home wherein I had at least the right to lay my head in peace; but ere—(this thought vanished). What about to-morrow? Somebody else might become its proud owner! Again an unbearable depression stole over me. I heard the steps of my brother:—

“Dressed?” he queried—“come along, the Jagirdarsahib has come”.

I followed him silently into the hall where I was introduced to the Jagirdar. He was, to the casual observer doubtless a handsome man. In figure he was not more than the middle size but was built on active and graceful lines. His colouring was dark, while two small eyes glistened under a narrow brow; the shapely lips were semi-covered by a raven-black moustache, which was pointed and carefully waxed. On the whole his features were regular and his manners pleasing.

On seeing me, he displayed a peculiar smile, greeted me, and seated himself on the sofa; next to him sat my brother and I, on the aged grandma chair.

They conversed on various subjects; they talked of things I had never heard of; of times past, of well-known society people. What stores of knowledge the Jagirdar had! Many a time during their conversation he glanced at me.

"Why are you so silent?" he abruptly asked.

"Generally she talks very little", answered my brother.

"May I have the pleasure of knowing your name?" the Jagirdar again asked.

"Gouridevi".

"A very nice name indeed! How do you pass your time in a dull place like this?"

"She is always occupied in writing" my brother announced.

"Writing what - stories?"

I shyly nodded.

"Well, one day I will tell you all about myself and you can write a story about it".

"Nothing will please me better" said I.

"Have your tales been made into books or have they only appeared in Magazines?"

"I have not written before; this is my first attempt and as far as possible I should venture to have it in a book form".

"Come to see my mother and sister. They are both here and will be delighted to meet you".

"I shall be very pleased to see them but what time will suit them?"

"Oh any! - When will it be convenient to you?"

"She is always free", said my brother.

“Then will you come to-morrow? — Say at about 5 in the evening”.

“I shall be very glad”.

He scrutinized his watch “May I take your leave now? — I am already late for my next appointment”.

He got up from his seat and after the usual “good evenings” he left us and once more a ray of hope fell on our clouded hearts.

CHAPTER II.

It was five past five when our rattling Ford conveyed me through the large massive gates of Palna Mahal.

The beautiful lawns and gardens indicated that the Jagirdar was, as my brother had said, a man of considerable wealth. A long winding drive opened out into a large square adorned with statues, amidst them was a fountain. The building, with its huge pillars, the large porch, was so imposing in size and solidity, that it almost seemed an architectural nightmare. The car stopped under the porch.

I alighted and slowly walked up the white marble steps; a man came towards me.

"Jagirdarsahib is sleeping but Maisahib and Lila-baisahib are there", he declared, pointing to the left side of the long corridor.

But, seeing my puzzled look he beckoned me to follow. A walk through the corridor took us to a bedroom as I gathered it to be, from the bedstead and the scattered clothes; then I was ushered in from between a heavy red velvet curtain.

It was a large room. A group of ladies were sitting there; they were but seven yet, somehow as they flocked together they gave one the impression of a greater number. I knew their names afterwards; so I might as well mention them here.

Firstly there was the Begum of Palun and her two daughters; she had evidently been a pretty woman

and was well preserved still. Of her daughters, the elder was plump, short and seemed haughty from her face and manner. The younger one was tall; elegant in figure, with a slightly spotted face. Both were dressed alike, in bright red saris and similarly coloured blouses, which were adorned with large gold sequins.

The Rani of Mena was less showy. She had a small figure, a pale complexion, jet black hair and well-moulded features. With her pale blue sari, and simple pearl necklace, she looked the best of all.

But the most distinguished—partly because she was the hostess — was Maisahib, the Jagirdar's mother. She might have been between fifty and sixty but her shape was still fine, her hair still black and her teeth still perfect.

Her expression was of almost insupportable haughtiness, and as I did bow to her, she surveyed me up and down.

"Sit down", she said arrogantly, pointing to an empty chair in the corner.

This curious aversion which she appeared to conceive towards me was indeed surprising, for her manner was almost rude and offensive.

Her back was in my direction and the pink sari she wore was semi-covered by a yellow shawl of some rich gold-worked material. My brother had said that this lady was of Barber extraction. Her crude language and low bearing sufficiently established the truth of this report and I excused her

on the score of her ignorance of our modern customs and cultured etiquette.

The Jagirdar's sister was milder in her expression though she also bore the same look of arrogance as her mother. She was bulky in form; her features were plain, while her two upper teeth protruded from her lips. She was dressed in a gold embroidered silk sari of a dull greenish hue; the blouse was of the same material which made her appear several tones darker than her natural colouring.

Then there was Dhondubai, a woman of not a very pleasing reputation. She was an abnormally large personage of about fifty with very big hands and feet. She sat on the floor, just near the haughty Maisaheb.

They all seemed unconcerned about my presence. I looked at my plain dress! I wore a simple fawn-coloured sari, no ornaments adorned my neck save a necklet of white crystal beads: my sari had no gold work, but just a narrow silver border which hardly could stand comparison with their broad brocade borders.

It was nearly an hour as I sat there, but I thought it almost double that time, for I was so stiff and weary sitting in the same position. All the ladies talked, laughed and whispered. I felt an out-cast.

The world is a strange place for those who have tumbled down from the top. They become objects of mockery. I know, had I that day come adorned with tons of jewellery and grandly dressed, my hostess (never mind the method by which I may have

gained this wealth) would have endured my presence more complacently, and the world would have been a better place for me, but alas! It is indeed a strange and tragic sensation to youth to feel so unwanted.

I was thinking these thoughts, when Lalaji, the secretary of the Jagirdar stood in the doorway :—

“Jagirdar Sahib is down, and would like you to join him for tea”, he said, looking in my direction.

Maisahib turned her head haughtily towards me, and in doing so, she stooped down and whispered something to the fat Dhondubai who raised her brows and stared at me along with the other ladies.

I felt humiliated and ashamed. I wished the earth would swallow me then and there. I got up and bowed again, but ne’er did I get a smile or a nod in return, and you can imagine my feelings at leaving my hostess and her strange company.

From the bed-room I entered the corridor again, when, through a side door, Lalaji showed me into the large, magnificently decorated drawing-room.

The Jagirdar was sitting on a pink plush settee. There was a smile on his lips as he stood up to greet me. His eyes were sparkling unusually — whether with wine or not, I am not sure — but I think the first surmise the more probable.

“Good evening”, he said. “Please be seated”.

That very moment Itzu Ra came up the porch-steps towards us. She was one of the few Egyptian women who frequented mixed society without purdah; who flirted with every man, and was the cause of

much scandal. She had a slight figure, thin pallid cheeks, small, narrow, deep-set eyes and lips set in a hard cruel line.

"Goodness child ! Just imagine seeing you here", she, grasping my hand, lisped, "and you never even hinted, that you knew her" she continued to the Jagirdar.

"I knew her parents, but I only came to know her yesterday; besides, how was I to know that you were also acquainted with her?"

"How is Mina?" Itzu inquired after a little reflection.

"He is well, thank you" returned I.

She went near the Jagirdar and stood before him.

"Sit down, Itzu" he ordered irritably.

She sat down next to him on the settee.

The butler in white and yellow brought in the tea in a large silver tray. The tea-set was of a delicate pink, with a gold design; another tray arrived with an assortment of Indian sweets.

"Shall I pour the tea?" I asked the Jagirdar.

"No wait, let me do it", put in Itzu.

"How many spoons of sugar?" she asked me.

"Two please", I announced.

"None for you dear Sir", she declared with a mischievous glance at the Jagirdar.

"As long as it is from your hands I need have no fear about its sweetness", flattered he, at which she displayed a smile of great pleasure.

"Won't you try some of these sweets?", the Jagirdar looked at me and asked.

"No thank you, I don't like sweet things".

"What a shame I was not aware of it before—otherwise I would have had some savouries for you : I thought ladies were generally fond of sweets : What do you say ?" addressing Itzu.

Itzu was munching a big piece of toffee.

"Anyway, I like them ; hot-eaters always have nasty tempers".

"What makes you think so ?" I asked.

"Personal experience". She whispered.

Tea was over, the trays removed.

"Where is Radhabai now — is she upstairs ?" narrowing her eyes Itzu asked of the Jagirdar.

His expression changed ; he looked at me and searched my face, then quickly he replied.

"No, she is not here".

I did not quite understand his confusion and hesitation, but the curious expression which Itzu displayed gave me some idea of the solution of the mystery.

"Are there a lot of ladies with my mother ?" he recommenced.

"Yes".

"Then she could not have been able to talk much with you ?"

"No".

Itzu was silent but suddenly she eyed her wrist-watch "Oh, Jagirdarsaheb, there is a lovely film at the Roxy to-day—let us go—we'll be just in time".

"Shall we go Miss Gouri ?" he asked.

"I am sorry I must be returning home early" replied I.

"Don't be babyish, child", Itzu retorted, "I will chaperon you".

"Thank you", I said, with annoyance, "I can look after myself".

"So much the better, my dear", with a shrug of her shoulders Itzu declared.

Lalaji appeared through the corridor.

"Jagirdarsaheb, Raja Madanrai has come."

"Let him come here" said the Jagirdar.

"May I take your leave now?" asked I.

"As you like" came his reply.

I thanked him for the cordial treatment.

"My dear, where are you staying now?" Itzu asked.

"At St. Clements Road. Do come over one evening" carelessly I remarked.

"Right O" she ejaculated with a wave of her hand.

The Ford was waiting near the porch while under it awaited the beautiful Rolls Royce of the Jagirdar.

I stepped into the Ford and the next instant found myself going homeward.

CHAPTER III.

Slowly the dreary monsoon had come to an end and the tearing wind had chased all the clouds from the sky displaying to the onlooker the beauty of the stars and the brightness of a full moon.

I walked up and down the veranda. The clock struck ten, still there was no sign of my brother.

When will he come, methought inwardly; it was not his habit to be out so late!

Hope revived, as a dog barked near the gate and a little later my brother appeared.

"How late you are" I remarked as he entered the veranda.

"I would have been back earlier but the Jagirdar-sahib met me on the way and took me home for dinner".

The moonlight fell on his face and revealed it to be extremely pale and haggard; he was nervously playing with his fingers.

"Why are you so nervous? Has anything happened?" I asked anxiously.

"No! Nothing! I think the champagne is working on me".

"Where did you take it — at the Jagirdar's?"

"Yes! He forced it on me".

We went in.

"Give me some coffee" asked my brother. In the kitchen I prepared a cupful on the stove and handed it to him. It was not my habit to dine without or before my brother; so as he finished the coffee I took

the empty cup, washed it and ate of what Ram had left in the larder.

Yes reader, you will be curious to know more about this Ram.

He was our only servant — or rather, he was the only person who stood with us through all our troubles. He had seen us in better days and to-day there was none who was so overcome at the mention of that time. It was Ram who was our friend — who never till this day had given us a moment of trouble. He was our cook, butler, bearer and when need called he even cleaned and drove the car — but the car was no more — my brother had sold it.

It was nearly one o'clock when I entered my bed and was soon fast asleep.

When the long night-shadows had disappeared and bright sun-shine filled my chamber, I woke up. Ram was preparing tea. I washed and dressed. When tea was ready, I poured a cup and as usual took it to my brother's bed room. He was still sleeping.

"Mina" I touched him gently, "the tea is ready".

He murmured, and as he turned, the strange pallor of his face frightened me. It was flushed, with a ghastly yellowish tinge. I felt his forehead, — it was hot — burning hot!

"Mina, are you not well?" I frantically asked, but there was no response. I applied the thermometer under his armpit, it registered 105 degrees. I hurried Ram to Dr. Wright our next door neighbour and

with undescrivable eagerness I awaited his coming. Never had I felt so unstrung, my courage all gone.

"The doctorsab is coming" exclaimed Ram on his return.

I put a wet cologne-water pad on Mina's forehead.

An hour later the sturdy form of Dr. Wright was in sight.

"Good morning", he said, "Well, what is the matter?"

"My brother is not well".

"What is the complaint?"

"Fever", said I, as we entered my brother's room.

The doctor studied the patient's pulse, applied the thermometer, then after removing it, examined my brother's chest, stomach, back and tongue; then bit his lip and looked towards me:

"Since when has he had this fever?"

"Only last night he complained of feeling unwell".

"Has he been out yesterday?"

"Yes, he went out at four o'clock and returned at about ten".

The doctor gave a nod and asked for a paper which I handed to him.

"Get these dispensed quickly", handing me the prescription "and give him a dose of the red mixture; if the fever continues, then give him the same, but if it goes down, then give him the white mixture and only liquid diet, no solid food must be given. I shall come again in the afternoon. Also get a tin of Anti-phlogestine."

We entered the veranda.

"Doctor" said I "is he very serious?"

"Well, young lady, it all depends upon your nursing".

"Shall I give him milk and soda?"

"Yes, and the medicine must be repeated every third hour".

I placed three rupees in his hand.

"Thanks", he murmured "I shall come at two o'clock again. In the meanwhile if the temperature goes up, then drop me a word".

So saying Dr. Wright departed, leaving me in worry and great anxiety.

The post-man appeared and handed me a letter addressed to Mina. I opened it. It contained the bill and a strong letter from Johnson and Higgins for some clothes which my brother had bought on account from them seven months ago.

A five rupee note was my sole possession. How could it suffice me?

I dressed quickly, opened the closet and brought forth the diamond ring which had occupied that place all these years. This was the only ornament which had survived from our ancestral jewellery. The diamond was large and square; it glistened fiercely. My thoughts flew back to my carefree and happy childhood, but what a change! What great difference had separated that Gouri Dutt and this! Tears dimmed my eyes. I wiped them, and after informing Rama I left the house.

I walked fast. It warmed me. The road was not crowded. A turn towards the right brought me to

the main road. Shops were visible now. I passed Beheramji's when a ragged beggar girl encountered me.

"Me moder sick, give me money". She pleaded so tragically that it roused my pity and charitable feeling. Her thin sallow face and drawn cheeks were too appealing to be ignored.

A four anna piece was in my pocket. I placed it in her eager hands. Her face lighted with pleasure; gratefulness shone through those lifeless eyes.

This was my weak nature, here I was starving myself and yet, you may think, that I was trying to show off my generosity. No, gentle reader, it eased my torn heart—it gave me a satisfaction; at least for the moment I felt happiness was mine. It was my mother's teaching to be unselfish and to understand others' sufferings;—this teaching was so deep-rooted in me, that it asserted itself with great force.

I climbed up the long winding steps of Jessamal Ranchod; a few paces led me to their show-room.

"What is your need?" asked the man in a white shirt and dhoti.

I fumbled in my purse and brought the ring out.

"What would you estimate the price of this?" I asked handing him the ring.

He narrowed his eyes, looked the ring up and down for about five minutes.

"About two thousand" he said hesitatingly.

"Are you sure"?

"We have one like it, but little cheaper" said he.

"I do not want to buy. — I want to sell this",

He took the ring to the man at the counter. He also examined the ring, then they both came towards me.

"You want to sell this?" the man from the counter asked.

I nodded.

"We can give you seven hundred for it".

"What! only seven hundred? Just now you estimated it to be worth two thousand!"

"Yes", interrupted the first man, "that is the value I declared, but if you want to sell it, nobody will offer you more".

"I am sorry, I cannot sell it".

"What is your lowest price?" seeing the finality of my tone the man in dhoti asked.

"Not below fifteen hundred".

"Well, look here madam", resumed the second man "our final price is one thousand rupees and let me tell you that this is the highest that it will fetch; there is no value at all for diamonds these days".

I waited near the steps thinking. Money is a great necessity in life; even a little helps so much; but what of those who have no resources whatsoever, — whose every hope and its every trace has been burnt to cinders by cruel fate and poverty, who only look to God and wash His Holy feet with their heartwrung tears! I was one of these. My sole comfort lay in trust, faith and belief in Him. Slowly, I entered the show-room again. The man in dhoti was there still, on seeing me his face gladdened.

"Have you decided to sell it?" he asked.

"Yes", I hoarsely murmured, and handed him the ring with a last sad glance at the singular brilliance of the stone.

The man examined it again—(to make sure that I had not changed it;) he then passed it to the man at the counter who also followed suit. A little later I was given the money which I carefully shoved into my purse and was once more on the now-crowded road. I took the bend round the left side of the town hall and a five minutes walk placed me before the great building of Johnson and Higgins' well established store. This shop was huge and contained the most modern and upto-date articles. The front show-cases displayed an array of magnificently coloured chiffons and flimsy materials of lovely delicate designs. The ground floor contained photographic and stationery goods, while on the left was the ladies beauty saloon. A cashier's box was near. I paid my brother's bill and came out quickly. I crossed to the other side of the road handed the druggists the doctor's prescription and asked for a tin of Anti-phlogestine, which they handed to me along with the medicines. I paid the price and quickly retraced my steps home.

CHAPTER IV.

Four months have passed since Mina's lingering illness. He is still confined to bed—a thin fleshless body—his face as white as the sheets that covered him. He slumbered peacefully; this gave me a little freedom from the sick-room atmosphere. I went to the veranda and walked backward and forward.

My plight had indeed been pitiful and only I myself knew as to how much I had been, and was nursing my brother.

A jasmin creeper gracefully hung over the porch and its star-like flowers looked picturesque through the dimness of a chilly December evening. The dusk was gathering and the shadows had just begun to creep. Change, I thought, how was it possible for Mina to get a change of climate? "otherwise the effect of this weakness would be very serious and the patient pass beyond human aid", the doctor's gruff voice rang in my ears; this question was haunting me like some evil spirit: day and night this was my only thought.

This moment methought I heard the front gate creak. My doubts were soon set at rest when the silver grey Rolls Royce of the Jagirdar of Palna came and stood majestically under the porch and the next instant the Jagirdar himself gracefully alighted.

"Hellow!" he greeted "How soon you seem to have forgotten me!"

"No, not at all,—but owing to my brother's illness, I have not been able to think about anything else".

"Why? What's wrong with him?"

He has been down with pneumonia".

"With pneumonia?"

I nodded.

"Since when?"

"Almost after he met you last".

"How is he now?"

"Much better thank you, though he has become very weak".

"Who has been nursing him? you alone?"

"Please come in, it is rather chilly outside" said I. He followed me into the drawing-room and seated himself.

"Is he still confined to bed?"

"Yes".

"Will I not be able to see him?"

"I will see whether he is awake".

Mina was still fast asleep. I lighted the big table lamp and took it to the drawing-room.

"He is still asleep", said I, placing the lamp on the centre table. Its light fell on the dark, well-cut face of the Jagirdar, and I felt a comfort on seeing the anxious expression it bore.

"You are doing the house work too?" he asked.

"No, there is a servant".

"Who is your doctor?"

"Dr. Wright".

"I hope he is a good doctor".

"Fairly good;—at least he has been very vigilant".

"What does he say now? I hope he is out of danger".

"Almost, but the doctor thinks that a change is entirely necessary". I heaved a sigh.

"Where have you decided to go?"

"Nowhere!"

"But if his health depends upon it, you must go somewhere". I only smiled,—a bitter, sad smile.

"Why are you silent?" he asked.

"Then what should I say?"

"Answer my question?"

"We can't afford it".

"Will you let me help you?"

I stared at the wall blankly and was silent.

"Speak please", he resumed, "let me be your friend;—trust me as you would your own relation. What is all this wealth to me if it is not to be used for those who need it? Shall I offer a suggestion?"

He surveyed my face intently. "You know" he began "I have houses at Jalinta and Meherban—they are health resorts.—Any of them, is open to you and you will be my welcome guests. Do you agree to it?"

"But Jalinta and Meherban are too far off", said I dryly.

"What do you mean by far off? You cannot take a change some few miles from here".

He awaited my reply, and with compressed brows asked "Do you mean about the travelling expenses?"

Still I was silent.

"Speak,—please tell me", he said with vehemence.

"Yes, it will be too expensive".

"I will be responsible for all that".

"But how can we repay you?"

"How badly you have mistaken me. Do you take me to be a Shylock to demand repayment? For God's sake don't talk like this—it hurts me", he pleaded.

"It is very kind of you", I gratefully replied.

"Not at all—".

Rama had entered—"Sahib has woke up and he wants you" he said to me.

I excused myself to the Jagirdar and went to Mina's room "Who has come Gouri" he asked

"The Jagirdar sahib" returned I, "He is eager to see you".

"Let him in", my brother said

I re-entered the drawing-room and asked the Jagirdar whether he cared to see him.

"Of course!" he smiled and followed me into the sick chamber.

"Hellow, Mina", the Jagirdar exclaimed, went near my brother's bed and clasped his thin, proffered hand "What's all this fuss?"

My brother only returned a wan smile and said "It is so nice of you to have come. You know I have thought of you so often and even asked her" looking towards me, "to write to you".

"But she didn't want to have anything to do with me—isn't it so?" he tried to joke.

"Oh no Jagirdar sahib", my brother said.

"Have I the pleasure of your good opinion Miss Gouri?" the Jagirdar interrupted my brother and asked.

I looked down: I felt embarrassed.

"What diet are you having?" he resumed, seriously and anxiously addressing my brother.

"Oh! only milk, milk and milk, and I am simply fed up with it".

"He has soup, toasts and light dishes" I interrupted "but he always wants spicy preparations".

"Get well soon and you can eat whatever you like" remarked the Jagirdar.

"But I am alright now" assured my brother.

"No, you are not! You are too weak yet".

The distant tower clock chimed 8.

"It is getting late" began the Jagirdar, "Shall I say good-night now?"

"Please come again soon. It is so dull and trying, to lie in bed with no one to talk to".

"You have her", the Jagirdar teased.

"She is too busy with her house-hold duties"

"But, it is her duty to cheer you too!"

"Well, she does do it. I cannot say that she entirely ignores me; in fact she has taken great pains during my illness—".

"Yes, she does look pulled down and I think a change is badly needed by both of you".

"The doctor says the same", said my brother.

"Well, get a little stronger and we all will go for a change — shall we not Miss Gouri?" asked the Jagirdar,

"Yes, we will" returned I.

The Jagirdar patted my brother's hand playfully.
"Well, good-night. I will see you again soon".

“Good-night”.

The Jagirdar left the room. I followed him into the drawing-room. “He does look to be in a very poor state of health and I do hope you will think seriously about my suggestion. You, I know, distrust me—you disbelieve my sincerity—”.

“No, certainly not. I must first consult the doctor and will then let you know”.

“Truly?”

“Of course”.

His tone was earnest and it was impossible to distrust him.

We entered the veranda.

“By the way when I met him last, Mina had said something about having sold your car. So shall I send one of mine?”

“No thank you. There’s hardly any use of a car”.

“Whenever you need one, mine is at your command. Well,—Good-night”.

“Good-night”, returned I, and the next instant the graceful Rolls and its handsome owner disappeared from my sight.

I was puzzled. My inner-most thoughts regarding the Jagirdar were difficult to analyse. Yet I felt I could not entirely distrust him—his manner and talk seemed so sincere. He had wealth—a position in the world—what motives could he have in trying to fool a poor girl like me? Many thoughts flashed across my busy brain. I bolted the front door.

“What has the Jagirdar sahib been saying?” Mina on my entering his room asked,

“Nothing much. He seems to be rather anxious about your health and wants you to have a change — and at his expense”, I added.

“Then what did you say ?” he eagerly queried.

“What could I say ?”

I arranged the table next to his bed. Rama brought the soup and toasts.

“I do wish we could have change from these dull wretched surroundings”, Mina muttered.

I handed him the soup.

“Yes, I wish we could”, returned I and a sigh escaped me.

“Then why are you driving away the chances of escape from it ?” Mina peevishly asked.

“What chances have I driven back ?”

“No, none at all !” he jeered.

“I don’t understand you”. I calmly replied.

“What does it mean when you refuse the Jagirdar sahib’s kind proposal ?”

“But who says I have refused it ? I told him that we will consult the doctor and will let him know. I don’t see any refusal in that”.

He ate a slice of toast, finished the soup and once more lay back in his bed. I went near him and gently clasped his hand “We must have patience Mina, and everything will be well” I softly whispered.

“Yes, when I’m in my grave” he snapped.

“Don’t be so downhearted, Mina. — Do you think it makes me happy when you talk like this ?”

He was silent.

BANDHI PEACE FOUNDATION
BANGALORE CENTRE,
GANDHI ENAYAN
Kumar Park (East), BANGALORE.

I loved my brother and his unsympathetic attitude hurt me. I longed for sympathy and understanding and also felt the humiliation of cruel circumstances. I may have possessed many faults — but it must not be overlooked that I was yet young in years and had still my childish ideas and fancies which no doubt could only be rubbed off by experiences of passing years.

CHAPTER V.

It was a bright morning, intensely cold. The new year had begun; people were enjoying leisure hours, away from the humdrum of office-life. But for us, there was no change, and I had begun to hate the monotonous way of our living. I tried to occupy myself in the garden—grass and weeds had grown in-between the rose beds. How I loved them—yet, I was almost killing them.

I filled the can at the garden tap and watered all the plants; it renewed their life—they sprung up and revealed their beautiful green foliage, the pretty blooms once more delighted me with their scent as if to thank me for my labour. A little time I was entirely happy, thinking of ungranted joys; of imaginary people who loved and understood me.

"Hellow child" a voice behind me exclaimed and I turned round to see myself facing Itzu Ra.

"A very happy new year to you" she declared, kissing me lightly on the cheek.

"Same to you. — Please come in" I asked.

"Where is Mina?" following me she enquired.

"He must be in the drawing-room—" but before I could finish the sentence he himself had appeared outside.

"Oh dear, what is wrong with you?", Itzu observed, seeing the sickly condition of my brother. "Have you been ill?" she enquired of him.

"Yes, he has been down with pneumonia" replied I.

"But what has given us the pleasure of your visit?" my brother asked.

"Oh, you know Mina dear, I have been so very busy these few days. — The Jagirdar sahib would not leave me for even a single minute. There were so many guests of his, and the balls, cocktail parties, all have kept me so busy".

We went in, Itzu and my brother seated themselves on the sofa. I enquired of Itzu if she would have some coffee, tea, etc. She shook her head with a "No, thanks", and busied herself at amusing Mina. His face brightened, and I knew that he liked the senseless and flattering prattle of Itzu Ra.

I left them, and entered the back veranda but the constant blowing of a horn came to my ears. Who could it be, thought I, as I re-entered the front from the little side room. A blue car was under the porch and Itzu was already there talking with the driver.

"Some flowers and a note for you", she thrust them in my hand and remarked with a peculiar twist of her lips. "From the Jagirdar".

The letter contained an apology for his absence and an enquiry about Mina's health. It also contained a new year's greeting card, which bore the photograph of the Jagirdar himself.

"He does seem to be greatly interested in you" she resumed mockingly, and narrowed her tiny, steel like eyes.

"He has enquired after Mina's health. What has it got to do with me?" I retorted, a little angrily.

My brother appeared, "What is it?" he asked.

I handed him the note silently. He read it and asked if I would reply. I shook my head at which he went to the writing table, wrote the answer and after closing it handed it to the driver, who took it and departed with the car.

On the centre drawing-room table I was arranging the flowers when Itzu and my brother appeared.

"I told Gouri that the Jagirdar sahib seems to be greatly interested in her", she repeated to Mina in the same tone.

"The Jagirdar sahib is a very nice man" commented my brother, "he has very little arrogance like these other society people. Besides he knows me since my boyhood, as he was acquainted with father — so naturally he is interested".

Itzu was silent for some time. "Do you know his past history?" she very suddenly asked.

"Well", Itzu resumed "they say that he has no right to the Jagiree — that his mother is a prostitute from South India. You know, I even heard that the wife and real heir of the late Jagirdar are living, — but she is the daughter of some big Maharaja and she does not want to degrade herself by claiming her rights —".

"It cannot be true", interrupted my brother.

"But you know", continued Itzu, "the Jagirdar has got a very bad reputation and people are not even willing to consider him as human; they say that he is more fit to be called an animal".

"I don't believe these things", said my brother.

"He drinks a lot" continued Itzu, "and one day he nearly choked me. It is said that he murdered a

friend's wife". — She surveyed my face intently and then exclaimed "Hang it all ! Who is going to bother their head about this fellow's birth and that fellow's birth — let all those busy bodies go to hell".

She came towards me "Poor child !" she ejaculated "Have I annoyed you ?"

"Not at all", said I.

She took my hands and clasped them in hers. "When are you coming to dine with me ?" almost purring she asked. I looked at Mina. She turned towards him. "When will you come Mina ?"

"When I am able to digest a hearty meal !"

"Well dear, just phone or drop a line — will you ?"

"Yes certainly", returned my brother.

"It is so very nice of you".

"Tut, nothing of the sort, cheerio. Now I must be going. Well, good bye child".

"Good bye", said I.

"Get well soon", she continued to my brother "you are looking awful. I shall try to come as often as I can".

"Yes do".

And the next instant Itzu was at the wheel of her green roadster, and with a light wave of her hand she drove away, on to the dust laden road.

CHAPTER VI.

The 5th of April had come ; just two months since our arrival at Jalinta. Each day Mina was looking healthier and you can imagine my joy at seeing his glowing cheeks. I was overcome with gratitude, for I felt that to the Jagirdar-sahib I owed the renovated life of my brother.

I shuddered when I remembered the way my brother had to be carried to the station. I never could have even imagined that I would ever see him as he looked to-day !

We occupied the little guest-house in the compound of the Jagirdar's stately mansion. Our little residence was lavishly furnished in green and gold ; yellow curtains draped all the doors and the Jacobian furniture gave it a grand appearance.

External surroundings have a great effect on the young ; I thought that here a new and better era of life had begun ; but man foolishly grasps the blossoms, forgetting their thorns.

My brother was always with the Jagirdar. I rarely saw him during the day but from short interviews I gathered that he was happy and content.

A staff of servants had been engaged for us. Rama was there and enjoyed his leisure hours by bossing over the butler and ayah. He was highly pleased with the magnificent surroundings.

A small child was playing near the Jagirdar's residence ; it was driving a toy motor.

"Whose baby is that?" I enquired of the ayah.

"The Jagirdar sahib's" the ayah with a curious grin returned.

"Is he married?"

"He is not married, but Sonabai is just like his wife", she said with a giggle.

"Humph! Then why don't they get married?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "They are like married".

A bearer from the Jagirdar's mansion was coming; seeing him the ayah grinned and disappeared.

"The Jagirdar sahib is coming", the man said.

"Where — here?"

"Yes".

A little later the Jagirdar himself appeared.

"Hello, Gouri, coming for a drive?"

"Now?"

"Yes".

"Lobo", he called the bearer, "tell Vincent to bring the car here".

The car slowly approached. I was asked to step in, and was followed by the Jagirdar who seated himself next to me.

"To the Central Park Gardens", he ordered the chauffeur.

Through boulevards and avenues we went.

"How do you like Jalinta? Don't you think it to be a very beautiful place?" he broke the silence and asked.

"Yes, I do".

"I hope you have taken a liking to it?"

"I seem to like it".

"That means you are not sure of yourself". He paused. "You know, there is going to be a surprise for you!"

"Yes? May I know what it is?"

"I am going to marry".

"Yes?" I repeated again, carelessly, — for the picture of the child in the toy motor stood before.

"A very beautiful princess is going to become my bride", he continued.

"How lovely", said I, "till this day I have not witnessed a marriage, so yours will be the very first I will see".

"Then you will be pleased at seeing me get married:"

"Of course!"

The Jagirdar laughed and looked towards me. The car slowed down. The scene was wonderful, — a beautiful pond; on its banks were snow-white lilies. The park too was adorned with exquisite flowers, hollyhocks had sprung up, the borders of the beds were gay with the most delicious-looking daisies. In the distance the bold hills peeped majestically. —

"Don't wait, — proceed home" ordered the Jagirdar.

How different natures were, — here I longed to gaze and gaze at the glory of Nature but here was another whose barren eyes saw no beauty therein.

"Speak Gouri" he commenced, "I like to hear you talk, to see your pleasing smile. This coming marriage has made me somewhat sad, so cheer me up".

"Sad?"

"Yes, — because I don't love the princess".

A Parsee girl was walking on the road — she waved her hand—the Jagirdar smiled and raised his hat in return.

“By the way Gouri, there is going to be a ball and singing-party at my place to-night and I should like you to be present. Will you come?”

“But I have never been to balls or parties”.

“That does not matter; you can watch the fun there”.

“Alright — thank you”.

We had entered the compound of Rati Mahal. The car came to a stand still before the Jagirdar's mansion. He alighted. “Don't forget — this evening at 9 p. m.”, reminded the Jagirdar as he closed the door of the car which brought me to the guest house and left me there.

CHAPTER VII.

It was nine o'clock. Traversing the garden, I ascended the huge marble steps into the large matted gallery.

One after the other the guests were arriving gaily and airily in big gliding cars.

The Jagirdar was not down yet. Lalaji was busy receiving the guests while the liveried butlers were occupied in serving wines to the arrivals.

Many Parsee ladies were there. The four good looking daughters of Sir Erusha Jijiwala, who had recently returned from Europe were present, while another comic attraction was Mrs. Somji, whose shingled mannish mode of hair-dressing and her very short sari made many a beholder giggle.

I stood at the extremity of the gallery. Mina was nowhere to be seen.

The Rani of Mena had come with her very beautiful daughter. Tall, with good features, a well-moulded figure, black elongated eyes and a haughty and commanding bearing she stood out majestically from the crowd.

Another sweeping guest arrived in the Maharani of Hajeenagar, whose heavy gold-worked sari of flashing red stood out in unpleasant contrast with her almost dark skin. Her ornaments consisted of rubies—they dazzled on her arms, hands, neck, ears and fingers.

Everybody was conducted upstairs, to the ball-room which was lavishly decorated. In the corner a band was playing.

The Jagirdar had now made his appearance and was soon surrounded by a crowd of girls. He greeted every guest with a pleasing smile. Then the dance began.

Unobserved I sat on a little stool in the small outside terrace. Here the moon was visible—the stars seemed to beckon me to their side. How lovely was Nature!

The Jagirdar was dancing with the youngest Miss Jijiwala but more than a dozen times I saw him scan the crowd, once or twice he spoke to Mina, who also looked about, as I knew in search of me, but I much preferred my safe retreat and the pleasure of dancing with Itzu stopped my brother from further enquiry.

It was past two when dancing stopped; some of the guests (mostly ladies) had departed and only the men remained.

A carpet was spread in the middle of the ball-room; chairs were brought and placed around it. Indian musicians appeared and seated themselves on the end of the carpet; they were soon followed by a short, fat lady who walked with curious shakes of the hips, (whether it was habitual or purposely done I could not tell). Her every movement was filled with vulgarity. She seated herself in the middle; the music began followed by her singing. With every note she moved her hands—gave a shake to her neck and rolled her eyes round and round displaying a curious grin.

"Marvellous !" exclaimed the Jagirdar.

"Wonderful — wa ha wa !" murmured a fat man who had got up from his seat and had approached the singer, who continued her singing. Suddenly she snatched a rose from her hair and threw it at the Jagirdar who eagerly grasped it and with a smile pressed it against his lips.

To my youthful innocent mind this seemed a very shameful act. It disgusted me, but the scene was not to end here — the fat man now seated himself very near the singer; he lifted her and took her on his lap. — There was a roar of laughter.

I got up. Slowly I came out of the small gallery and stepped into the side room; this chamber had an opening arch which led to the ball-room. The arch was covered by a multi-coloured chick; from this were visible all the proceedings of the singing party.

As semi-darkness pervaded this chamber, I was not aware that a number of ladies were seated there. —

"Hello" exclaimed a voice from the back and at the same time I felt somebody's clutch at my sari followed by the shrill screams of a child. —

"Mamma", the child, between sobs, began. "I was sleeping when Lila hit me on the eye", she clung to me and continued sobbing with her face buried in my sari. I did not know what to do. I patted her on her head "Sh — sh", I whispered.

"This your child?", the voice tauntingly asked and I recognised in it, its owner — Itzu Ra.

"No", I curtly replied.

"Then whose is it? She seems to be very fond of you".

"I do not know her".

"Humph", came Itzu's exclamation of entire disbelief.

(Hearing our conversation and I think my voice) the child let loose her hold of my sari. The ayah then sleepily appeared from the lighted side room — "Raje" she called; the child ran up to her and with a 'naughty baba' was soon carried away.

"Where have you been all the time?" Itzu began.

"In that gallery".

"Feeling ashamed of the crowd?"

"Why should I?"

One of the ladies interrupted. "Itzu, have you a torch?" she enquired "there is something wriggling near my feet".

"Wait, I shall switch on the lights", and soon the room was flooded with electric lights.

"Oh — look, there it goes", screamed the third Miss Jijiwala.

The object of all this bustle was Rani the pet mongoose of the Jagirdar, who was soon driven away by the noise made by the ladies.

The Rani of Mena, her daughter, and the Maharani of Hajeenagar were the only calm on-lookers of this incident.

The butlers were now approaching with the refreshments, and one by one each guest was lazily taking his share.

I crossed the veranda but while passing the door, the Jagirdar must have perceived me, for he accosted me on the stair landing —

“Where has my darling been?”, he cooed. “I thought that after all you did not come and I was going to come there to see you”. He paused, searched my face — “Where are you running away now?”

“Home”.

“You cannot go”.

“Why not? — it is so late — nearing three”.

“What of it? I have a lovely surprise for you”

“For me?”

“Yes, for you, darling”.

“Keep it for to-morrow, I am not well and have a headache”.

“Don’t lie”.

“I am not lying”.

“All right go; — I shall come there after seeing these people off”, he waved his arm and next moment had departed leaving me astonished at his unusually familiar and commanding manner. He is drunk thought I, as I descended the stairs.

On the way I encountered one of the musicians.

“Is Lalaji upstairs?” he enquired.

“I don’t know” said I.

For a second he stared at me.

I passed him on.

I approached the guest house; it looked dark and gloomy, — almost fearful.

I entered, switched on the lights and lay myself on the bed-room couch. I wished for my brother's presence but there was no sign of him.

It was nearly four when the singing had ceased and there was a stir in the Jagirdar's mansion. I viewed through the window: one by one the cars were disappearing behind the huge steel gates of Rati Mahal.

My eyes were heavy-laden with sleep and I was almost dozing when, with a start, I woke up on hearing a step, and a little later I heard the Jagirdar call my name.

I quickly stepped out.

"You must be cursing me — are you not?"

I did not answer.

He stood leaning his arm on the marble mantle-piece while his eyes were fixed on me.

"Come here".

"What for?", I irritably asked.

"Come here, I will tell you".

"Tell me from there".

"Then sit down — will you?"

I sat.

He came and sat down beside me; felt in his pocket and brought forth a red velvet case.

On opening, it revealed a well-cut diamond ring and a bracelet.

"These are for you", he declared showing them to me. "Aren't they beautiful?"

"I don't like jewellery".

"Then what do you like?"

"Nothing".

He took my hand, enclosed the bracelet on my wrist and put the ring on my finger.

"How nice they look Gouri! I have given orders for a necklace and earrings, and when my queen wears them, she will look an angel —".

"Please don't talk rubbish", said I.

"It is not rubbish". He paused "Now Gouri listen, — am I not handsome?"

"I am no judge of beauty".

"Is everybody in this world a judge of beauty? I want to know whether I am pleasing to you?"

"There is nothing attractive in you".

"You seem to be in a very rude mood to-night; here a man comes to you for sympathy, love, and understanding, but all that you offer him is a cold shoulder?"

"Sympathy will be given to those who need it —".

"And love?"

"To God".

He laughed. "You are childish — too silly. Well, then tell me sweetheart:—What you would offer to the man whose aged mother refuses to allow him to marry the girl he loves?"

"If I were he, I would try to persuade my mother".

"He has done his level best".

"He could not have".

"His mother threatens to kill herself".

"Has she any grudge against the girl?"

"She thinks all educated girls are bad characters".

"Does not the girl try to please her?"

"I have never asked her to do so—for I know, with my mother her efforts will be futile". Suddenly his eyes blazed; he fiercely turned and caught me in his arms. "Gouri", he whispered, "You know it; it is you I love and want to make my bride—".

"But Jagirdar sahib", I gasped and struggled from his clasp, "only in the morning you told me that you were to marry a princess".

"My mother wants me to marry her".

"And you must marry her", I pleaded. I got up from the sofa but he had caught the end of my sari—.

"Listen to me Gouri" he passionately cried.

"Jagirdar sahib", I said sternly "there is nothing for me to hear—let me go".

"Gouri, come here", he demanded, "listen,—my mother's days are short; till then be mine. Think sensibly:—who in the world cares for you—? There is nobody whom you should fear for transgressing a mere human law—".

"Stop, Jagirdar saheb! I am not doing things to please the world. I want to please my own self—my inner God"; so saying, I snatched my sari from his grasp.

"Oh suppress that anger! It does not befit your sweet face" he spoke softly, while his sensual eyes were intent on me. "Gouri, look here, I offer you all that I have; you will be the mistress of all my possessions and the queen of my heart. Come, say yes!—quick. I want to crush you against my heart—", he stretched out his arms.

"Stop, Jagirdar sahib ! You are talking inequity : —you are trying to taint my soul with your sinful desires".

"Remove that idea of sin, —there isn't any such thing in this world".

"How dare you say so?"

"Dare?", he mockingly laughed. "I'll dare anything".

"Then you are the devil himself".

"You are at liberty to call me whatever you like".

He got up from the sofa and strided towards me and savagely caught my arm. "It is human nature", he began, "when a thing can be had, it becomes cheap, valueless, —this has been the case with me ; I knelt before you —you became elated, —you thought you could kick me away, but let me tell you. Your pride —your destiny is in my hands —I can, within a moment, humble you".

"Can you?", I vehemently asked.

"Yes I can, and I am going to do it —".

"You are a brute, a man without principle. To-day you have shown to me your true colour. You were gilded, although innocently I mistook you for real gold!" My whole body shook with anger. I fiercely freed myself from his clutch, snatched the ring and bracelet and threw them at his feet "A lion will rather die of hunger than eat grass".

He picked up the ornaments and laughed maliciously. "You seem to have forgotten the Gouri Dutt of Oona?", he sneered.

"No, I remember her quite well".

"If you had, then you would not have been talking so ungratefully —".

"In my heart of hearts I am grateful, but I would prefer death to submitting to your putrid desires".

"Oh Gouri", he began, in an imploring tone, "only a few days, I'll marry you, till then be mine. I cannot stay without you".

Helpless as I were, I faced him boldly. "Go", I pointed to the door and commanded, "For the sake of God, go".

"Trying to frighten me, eh!", he screwed his face and asked, "this is the reward I get for saving you from penury, from drudging door to door and begging for food". He paused. "I suppose begging would have been most welcome to you".

"It certainly would have —".

"At least, it would have taught you a good lesson and made you realize the value of a good man's offer". Suddenly his face distorted; his nostrils dilated and he brutally looked towards me. "You know, I am a man who takes what he wants, so whether you consent or not, you are mine — I will make you mine".

"You think me helpless?"

"Of course. You seem to forget that you are living on my charity".

"I am not living on your charity, my brother is working with you".

"May I know what work he is doing?"

"What work? Your secretary's of course".

"And what is Lalaji doing?", he narrowed his eyes and asked.

A new power surged within me. I faced him with a strange courage. "So, this was your motive;—this was why you brought me here,—this hidden lust made you so anxious about my brother's health and you came forward with your false generosity —".

He wrinkled his brows and scowled: "Stop!", he ferociously demanded, "I want to know if this reply is your final".

"Yes, it is!"

"Alright", he vowed, "let us see whether your God wins or I win".

Once more he shot a brutal glance at me and, with quick heavy strides, departed.

I peeped into Mina's room but he was not there. A strange helpless feeling crept over me.

I lay on my bed; hot, burning tears rolled down my cheeks and wetted my pillow. An hour had passed.

"Gouribai?", came a whisper near the bath-room door.

"Who is it?", I asked.

"It is me,—Sushila", the voice whispered.

Fagged and weary, I opened the door. "What is wrong Sushila? Have you been beaten again?"

She displayed two deep bleeding wounds on her head just near the temple.

"Poor woman!" I murmured, "Come in", I loudly asked.

She heaved a sigh and silently obeyed.

I bolted, the door; bathed the wounds and filled them with boracic powder while to the small bruises I applied Iodine.

“Gouri?”, the woman abruptly began, “don’t you know me?”

I looked at her thin haggard face; it bore marks of great suffering, her large eyes had sunk, and were surrounded by dark brown circles; but as she lifted them towards mine, what a radiant light inspired them!—They were the eyes of a martyr,—a victim sentenced for an uncommitted crime. “Don’t you recognise me?”,—she again asked, while two big tears dropped from those touching orbs.

I slowly shook my head.

“I am Sushila Sen, Dr. Sen’s daughter —”.

“Sushila!”, I gasped, “it cannot be”.

Like a flash of lightning the curtain was lifted and the visions of past memories stood before me — yet, I was unable to make myself believe this to be the same Sushila Sen, my play-mate.

“But Sushila, where is your father — your mother — Sushila, my Sushila!”, I wrapped my arms round her and she clung to me like a creeper clinging to the nearest tree. She dropped her head; it sank low down and almost touched her breast.

“Gouri”, amidst sobss he resumed, “What can I tell you :—this brute has ruined me. Six years ago — father had lost his job and the little fortune that had been made, went in speculation and we were just like beggars.—To mother this was a shock, —she took it to heart — silently brooded over our sad fate, which after four years’ mental and physical suffering resulted in consumption and her death.

"We were nearly starving when this rotter came; he was all kindness and promised to make father his medical adviser. He brought us here and six months later father died. He was murdered — poisoned, I am sure", she ground her teeth, "Oh Gouri, since that day the tortures I have felt — the degradation I have undergone —".

I clasped her face and wiped her tears with my sari.

"I knew you from the first day I saw you", she resumed, "playing with that dog in the garden. Oh I knew, that you also had been lured here to be crushed like me. I longed to warn you, but I felt ashamed — that's why, last time I told you that I was one of the servants. Ah! the pain is terrible". She clutched her head. "Do let me bandage it Sushila", I pleaded.

Her eyes widened. "No, don't". She paused. "Gouri, this is nothing new; when anything goes against his wish, he whips me. This compound is full of wretches". She was exhausted. "Have you seen the house at the back?"

I shook my head.

"Four women are staying there, two are with him — in the house; one has four children, yet this dog is hunting out for fresh victims", she cried hysterically.

"Sushila, calm yourself please", I implored, and gently rubbed my tear stained cheek against her wet and hollow one.

She looked at my face and gathered it in her hands. "Gouri! you have been crying too? — Is it for my sake?"

"No, Sushila —".

"You are Gouri", tears gushed down her cheeks.

"Stop crying, please", I pleaded in vain, "we will run away from here and will work somewhere to earn our living". She covered her face — and cried and cried.

"How can I show this black face to the world?" She murmured.

There was a foot-step, followed by a loud knocking. Sushila got up. "I must go", she whispered. There was terrific fear in her eyes, "if he sees me here he will kill me", she gasped and with unsteady steps her lean form staggered to the door and once more I gazed at her as she disappeared in the darkness.

"Gouri! open the door". It was my brother.

"Where have you been?", I angrily asked.

"To hell", he snapped back, "what have you spoken to the Jagirdar sahib?"

"What have I spoken?"

"You have insulted him —".

"In fact he has insulted me".

"He is incapable of insulting anybody."

"Hum!! you think so — do you?"

"But listen Gouri", he spoke calmly, "what is the use of this spirit; we cannot afford to be so independent and it is not right of us to be so ungrateful after all that he has done for us".

"You have been the cause of this obligation, so be grateful and repay him. What have I got to do with it?"

"Gouri, talk sensibly. What will be our condition, if to-morrow he drives us out?"

"I will beg", I retorted.

"Oh aside such senseless talk. The Jagirdar sahib is waiting and, like a good girl, I want you to apologise to him.—Come along".

"I have not done anything to apologise".

"May be, but for my sake do it".

"I cannot do it Mina. I'll give my life for you but.....", I covered my face with my hands.

"Come along Gouri,—please, for God's sake, come", he pleaded.

I was silent. He came and roughly pulled my hands away.

"Gouri, I am speaking to you", he sternly said.

"Minanath", I began in tears, "the Jagirdar has asked me to become his mistress—his mistress!", I shouted frantically, "and",—I almost whispered "you want to degrade your sister, to blacken her face before God and man?"

"But Gouri, what can be done? There is no alternative; we must submit to circumstances. Come, please come".

"I have said once, I cannot and will not come. Kill me or do whatever you like".

"You refuse to come?"

"Yes".

"Is this the way you repay a man for his goodness? If you were such a saint you should have lived in the jungles; then why do you want all this luxury?"

he gesticulated with his hand, looked at me with hatred and anger and banged the door and departed.

I entered my chamber but everywhere I looked, there stood the haunting vision of Sushila. My memory beckoned me to those happy days when we had played together as children. How I had admired those lovely chubby cheeks, her wide black eyes and her pretty ivory complexion. She always was the centre of admiration, but poor girl! What remained? No, not even a dry petal of that bud! I loathed the Jagirdar; now I saw him as he was!

What must I do? I had no money, no home, nowhere to go, yet it would be my downfall to stay here, in the luxurious surroundings of Rati Mahal. Wealth would come and go, but virtue once lost could never be redeemed again. I must flee, thought I,—I must go where His Merciful protection leads me to.

I dried my eyes, changed my sari into one of the old ones. I tied two others along with a couple of blouses into a bundle; my bag contained only a rupee and four annas in change—this I tied to the end of my sari.

I looked into the kitchen;—Rama was sleeping there. I longed to wake him—to say farewell, but I knew it would be a folly. He snored, and on his face lingered a gleeful expression. “Dear faithful heart—you shall wake to find me gone:—gone into the wilderness, to some strange and unknown land, but I will miss your helping hand”, a sigh escaped me. I suffered to depart: to part for the first time from my brother—yet “Gouri Dutt, walk on—think

not of the present or future—God is thy guide—”. I obeyed this inner command and stole quickly out of the house. •Dim dawn glimmered in the compound of Rati Mahal. I made my way to the back servants’ gate, opened it, passed out and shut it softly.

With a blank mind I walked on, for a glimpse behind would break down my energy and dissolve my courage.

I skirted through lanes, fields, till after sunrise. It was a bright lovely morning but I neither listened to the twitter of the birds nor looked up to the glorious awakening of Nature.

It was nearing noon when I sat down under a large mango tree; while I sat, I saw a cart come on. I lifted my hand; it stopped.

“Where does the road lead to?”, I asked of the driver.

He muttered the name of a place very far off.

“Will you drop me there?”

He looked me up and down, then said that he would take me on the payment of two rupees.

I told him I had only one. After some thought he beckoned me to get in.

This cart was covered by a straw matting; the front and back were open; inside were a number of bundles, an old kerosine oil tin, amidst these sat a small girl who gaped at me. “Where do you come from?”, the driver asked.

“From a village near by”, I carelessly replied.

“Ruikhed do you mean?”

“Ya!”

"There are a lot of nurses and teachers there."

I pretended not to hear.

"You are a nurse?"

"Ya".

Then with an oath and a "Ho-ho houshe", he whipped the bulls, and with bumps and knocks the cart rolled on.

CHAPTER VIII.

In the evening, the cartman put me down at a small village. I was hungry; a kindly old dame took pity on me and gave me a thick bajra bread, some onions, and shelter for the night. I was grateful to her and asked her if I could find some work; she shook her head; the village was small and was not used to hiring labour, as every family from the children to the grand-parents all managed their affairs and also worked for a couple of annas a day.

Morning arrived, and once more I was adrift, on an unknown voyage,—going where my feet led me to.

Wearily, I viewed the flowers,—the flaming red gold mohur looked angrily at me for my disdainful glance; bees hummed to the beauty of Spring. Nature was my sole companion — my only friend; she soothed my shattered mind, though ungratefully I not even rewarded it with a smile of appreciation.

The whole day had passed in lone wanderings; evening came and I searched for human habitation, but none could be found. Like an insane person I ran hither and thither in the hope of seeing some kindly light but nay, and ere darkness came forcing me to seek the shelter of a huge banyan tree; my feet and back ached, my over-strained eyes demanded rest. I lay down and in a moment had forgotten that I was a wanderer, a beggar, dragging my fagged limbs in search of food and work. I saw myself happy; singing gaily amidst the fragrance of pretty blossoms, but the fearful hoot of an owl woke me

with a shudder and a start, and once more reality stood before me in all her grimness.

‘What had I done, and what was I to do?’ — with every beat of my heart, rang these questions. Had I committed an error in leaving my brother and Rati Mahal? I would have had all the comforts and luxury of wealth with the Jagirdar and I may have been happy too — would I? Would not my soul and conscience have clamoured against the crime? They would certainly have had their revenge, and before my being aware of it, they would have murdered me mercilessly. To-day I was comfortless, homeless, yet my inner self remained untainted; it was my weapon, my only support. This thought comforted me; it drove away fear. I closed my eyes to avoid the fantastic creatures, which I seemed to see in the darkness; nestled close to the trunk of the tree and soon fell asleep.

Morning came. I struggled over fields and barren lands; the day was extremely warm; it was mid-day when I found a lone, aged farmer’s hut. Weary and sore-footed, with great shame and embarrassment, I pleaded for food.

He surveyed me —.

“Have you lost your way?” with astonishment he asked.

“I am looking for work”, said I.

A dog came growling at me.

“No sonny”, warned the man with a shake of his head.

“Sit down Bai,” he said to me, “I have nothing worthy to offer you, but I hope you will accept the

poor homage of a beggar"; so saying he disappeared in the hut, but soon had returned with a juar bread and some chilly chutney.

I devoured it with greed.

"Do you always stay here?", after finishing my meal I enquired.

He smiled and said "Yes, I always stay here".

"Alone?"

"Yes. I have two sons but they live in the village with their wives and children".

"Why don't you live with them?" I asked.

Tears gathered in his eyes "Bai, the world is not a place for the aged and the God-fearing".

I nodded "You are right", said I.

"Could I get any work here?" I enquired.

He pointed to the east and said that there was a big hospital some eight miles away, where I may be able to find work. I washed my mouth and face; drank the refreshing water of the well, thanked my kind host gratefully and resumed my journey towards the east.

I walked and walked till night arrived; my feet were blistered and sore. At last, a lighted bungalow was visible through a large hedge; amidst this was a small wicket gate. I entered it. Lights blazed everywhere. I climbed the steps and found myself on a richly furnished veranda. There was a bustle in the side room so I went there. It was a large room; three huge silver plates had been laid in a row. A Brahmin in a red silk dhoti was serving the food.

"Hay Baloo!" he shouted.

“Oo”, came the response, followed by the appearance of a boy.

“Go and tell Baisahib that the dinner is ready”. The boy disappeared.

A few minutes later a woman, hefty-looking, squint-eyed and with a bearing unmistakably vulgar entered and was followed by two men.

“Bhatji, why is dinner so late to-day?”, she demanded. The brahmin’s only response was a broad, comic grin. They seated themselves on the red-painted boards—the woman sat in the middle, and the men on her either side. — Dinner began.

“Give some more ladoos to Babooji”, she ordered.

The Brahmin brought a plate heaped with yellow round things which he served to each one of them. Suddenly the woman saw me—and stopped!

“Bhatji, who is that woman there?”, she asked with authority.

“What do you want?”, the Brahmin came to me and demanded.

“Is there a hospital here?”, I ventured.

“She wants to know if this is a hospital”, the Brahmin turned to his mistress and declared.

“Hospital!” exclaimed the woman and she laughed heartily. “Does my house look like a hospital?” she jeered.

“No”, said I, “I enquired whether there was a hospital near-by, where I might find some work”.

“What work—as a nurse?”

“Yes”.

"Come forward, let me see your face", she mockingly asked.

I still stood where I was.

The men were silently scrutinizing me — the younger one suddenly nudged the woman; bent towards her and whispered in her ear. His face seemed familiar, yet I could not recall where I had seen him.

The woman's face had now become very grave. "Call Sunderba", she ordered.

The brahmin summoned the lad Baloo and repeated the orders to him.

"Can you sing?", the woman asked.

I shook my head.

The coming of Sunderba was a shock to me, for she was none other than the vulgar songstress who sang after the Jagirdar's Ball. As she approached the woman pointed towards me and questioned her in a queer language.

She looked at me. "Were you not with the Jagirdar sahib of Palna?", she asked.

I stood there no more — panting and out of breath I staggered out of that rusty wicket gate.

'Would God never have mercy on me' came my agonizing heart-strung cry. Broken, fatigued, life seemed an unbearable burden to me.

The sky was clear; stars twinkled; the breeze softly whispered as if to lull its beloved ones to sleep. The river flowed on sublimely; it seemed a living companion to me as I dragged my feet along its high slimy bank and listened to its low placid voice. My

glazed eye wandered over the landscape. Who cares whether I live or die?

“Yes, I will die and I shall die with honour, faith, and trust in God”. These words I not only thought, but uttered.

“Whether we live or die we must possess honour, and have faith and trust in God”.

Terrified at the unexpected reply, I turned round and in doing so my foot slipped. “Be careful”, the voice hoarsely cried but, down I went, —to an unlimited depth. —Something dashed against my head, I splashed in the water, and felt smothered, but soon—darkness covered me. Then a strange light flashed, and I felt the gentle arms of Death lift me from the world of sorrows and joys into the land where truth and joy alone ruled, where God gathered all His forsaken ones, and tended to their bleeding wounds!

CHAPTER IX.

What has happened, thought I, as I surveyed the room? Comfortably I lay on a clean bed to which I seemed rooted, for I could neither move nor stir.

I do not know how many days I must have lain thus when little by little I could move and rise. My speech too had returned but much of it would soon put me out of breath.

Day by day I grew better. It was the third of July as I could see from the calendar on the opposite wall. I got up. Near my bed, on a chair were all my clothes. The sari I had worn hung against the wall, there were no traces of mud on it.

A bathroom adjoined my chamber, wherein I washed and dressed; an old comb lay on the small dressing-mirror, with it I combed my hair. At this moment Marie the Ayah appeared.

"What, you have got up!", she exclaimed with surprise.

"Yes", I returned, "I am tired of lying in bed".

"But Stuart Memsab has not given orders for you to get up?"

"I know, but I am quite well now".

"If the master comes to know, he will get angry —".

"Who is the master?", I interrupted.

"Why! it was he, who brought you here drenched and almost dying. He is the owner of this house and the hospital there", she pointed through the window to a large building and declared.

A crowd had flocked there.

"What are all those people there for?" I asked.

"Oh! those are all sick people coming for his medicine".

"So many of them?"

"Yes, on his return from the villages, the doctor has always a very busy time.

"What does he do at the villages?"

"Gives medicines".

"Who are the other people in the house?"

"Only his mother".

"Has he no brothers, sisters, — a wife?"

She screwed her lip and shook her head.

"Is his mother a nice lady?"

"Very."

"Where is she now?"

"Downstairs."

"Will you take me to her?"

She reflected — "Alright, come."

With the aid of the banisters I followed her down the oak staircase into a passage; this opened into a large hall which was modestly, yet extremely well and artistically decorated. The tall French windows and the palms seemed very picturesque, but the best of all, I liked the hush and the peaceful atmosphere which pervaded there; it made me forget that I was homeless, helpless, — a wanderer. Stranger though I was, I looked about, and felt as if I was already used to the place.

In a small snug room: a high-backed arm-chair wherein sat the dearest imaginable lady. She had no arrogance to cause embarrassment in others, yet

that noble brow, her stately carriage denoted high birth. Vivid with power and goodness, her countenance was remarkable; it added a greater charm to those silvery tresses. Her clothes consisted of a plain white sari and a close-fitting, long-sleeved blouse of pale blue colour.

As I entered she got up and came towards me.

"Has Miss Stuart allowed you to get up? You still look so pale—and so thin", she said anxiously surveying me. "Come", she resumed, "We will have tea", and conducted me to the dining room.

Here she poured the tea and handed me a cup.

"Eat those", she pointed to the square biscuits which the butler had placed before me.

I took one and obeyed her.

"For whom is the third cup", she enquired of the butler.

"For the master, your ladyship".

"Has he had his lunch?"

"No, but he sent orders that he would be coming for tea".

"What is the time?"

"Ten past five."

There was a heavy step in the hall and the butler's statement was soon confirmed by the appearance of his master.

Without looking about, he came and seated himself opposite me; drew out a handkerchief from his khaki trouser pocket and wiped his flushed and perspiring face. He was striking to look upon. His features were not perfect in their contour, yet they seemed

extra-ordinarily impressive, while his broad massive brow, stalwart figure and dignified bearing suggested a forceful character, but above all, the serene expression and the firm lips added depth to his personality.

"You have not had your lunch?", his mother viewed him tenderly and asked.

He shook his head.

"Dhiren, don't put so much strain on yourself".

"Could not help — they were urgent", came his response; then for the first time he looked towards me. "Well, have we trust in God?" he asked with a smile which was beautiful in its plainness.

I silently looked down.

"Are you better?", he sipping his tea enquired.

"Yes, thank you, I am".

"Where do you come from?"

"Oona".

"You came alone?"

"No, with my brother".

"Where is he now?"

I bent my head.

"Why, — you are crying?" with astonishment he asked.

His mother came and sat beside me. "Please don't cry", she pleaded, while my questioner was playing with a silver tea-spoon.

"You know", he tried to joke, "those who trust in God never cry!"

I faced him; my eyes met his. He seemed to search my inner-most thoughts, then he gazed vacantly at the open window.

"Yes", he began meditatively, "the world is a cruel place for some, but then they must ultimately find the fruit of that suffering—it is ever lasting joy". He heaved a sigh. "If you have no home, nowhere to go, then this house is open to you; you are at liberty to stay here—for always", he added after a pause.

"You are too good to me", commenced I slowly and softly, "and it will not be nice of me to hide things from you. My name is Gouri Dutt. I am of respectable parentage, but am an orphan now and have lived with my brother since the death of my parents. A month ago my brother had found a post when on account of certain reasons I was obliged to leave him."

"Where have you left your brother?"

"At Jalinta. I was told that I would be able to find a job here and I am willing to do anything. I will be a servant, a plain-work woman. I will be grateful for any service that you may offer".

My hostess smoothed my hair.

At the door a bearer appeared.

"What is it?", demanded the doctor.

The boy came forward and handed him a letter. It was opened, the contents read and the boy waved off. Then my host gulped the tea, apologised, and the next instant I heard his steps on the gravel out-side.

CHAPTER X.

Days flew into weeks — weeks to months — and months into years. Two years have passed since I entered Manor Hall and am now occupying the post, as the Matron of the Dayal Hospital's Orphanage. I have been given a little cottage on the eastern side of Manor Hall ; it has two rooms of equal dimensions. The front one has one table, four chairs and one side-board ; the back one contains a steel bed, one cupboard, and a tiny dressing table.

Mrs. Sinha, (my kind hostess) had wanted me to continue in Manor Hall but I thought it better to remove here, nearer the Orphanage premises, though every noon and night, the dear lady insists on sending my meals with Maria.

My work at the beginning, seemed very hard indeed but after some time I found that I was mistaken.

The ages of my pupils ranged from four to ten and they were eleven in number. Wholly ignorant with faculties quite torpid, at first they seemed hopelessly dull, but as we got to know each other, this improved rapidly and I found these lifeless rustics wake up into sharp-witted youngsters. They became obliging and took an intelligent interest in their work and study. The rapidity of their progress surprised everybody, which pleased me immensely and gave me a new joy, and an honest pride in my task.

I very rarely saw my host ; he was always absorbed in his surgery and medicine. Every week many

sufferers came and with a gleeful smile went away blessing their curer.

I used to see Mrs. Sinha quite often, and the more I came to know her, the more my heart warmed towards this worthy lady.

Miss Lucy, the third nurse in charge, was very fond of children and that day she had taken out my charges for their usual evening walk. Freedom was at my disposal, and I went out for a brisk walk, along the banks of the same river wherein I fell.

The few showers heralding the beginning of the monsoon had painted the meadows into a lovely green and it looked as if Nature had spread one of its loveliest carpets for the forsaken ones of the world like me to lie upon. White snow-drops, the shy blue-bonnets and the wild sweet-peas that piquantly peeped from amidst the Lantena bushes. They delighted me.

I sat and rested on the green sward. "Caw-Caw" crows were flying homeward while the sun was coquettishly peeping from behind a valley. I felt happy, — but suddenly another vision clouded my mind, and ere long I found myself weeping — why? For two whole years I had with my own hands separated myself from my brother, — twenty-four months had passed and I had lived just as if I had forgotten him but nay, it could never be. I remembered Mina and many a time I longed to write, — to hear of his welfare. I could not do it, I was degraded. I was a working girl — my brother would be ashamed of me. But — let me not despise myself for this

feeling, nay, whatever be the judgment of others, yet I knew very well inwardly that I was not degraded but had gained a step higher — may be spiritually if not from a merely worldly point of view. I fought for principle. God directed me unerringly and I thanked His Providence for the mercies granted to me. I hid my face in my bent knees.

“Oooo Brutus ! come here ! Stop — Oh — don’t move please ! Brutus !” came the piercing shrieks of a feminine voice. As I lifted my head a huge dog was on me and next I felt a stinging pain on my shoulder.

I tried to get up — to beat it away, but the more I fought, the more fierce he became. We struggled for a couple of minutes when with a savage snarl he left me and was soon chained by a rough looking dark man, while a well-clothed lady out of breath came up and knelt near me.

“Oh, I am so sorry, are you hurt ? — this idiot of a man let him go”.

She surveyed me anxiously ; there was a patch of blood on my shoulder. The lady saw it, got up and severely whipped the dog. He whined and growled. “Take him away”, she ordered the man angrily.

“Please let me take you to the hospital?”, she pleaded.

“No, it is alright”, I returned with a dry smile, “I can walk home”.

“No, you can’t”, she asserted, “the bite is serious”, she paused. “Please,” she implored, “please come”.

I submitted, and followed her to the light blue Erskine saloon which stood near the bend. We both entered.

"Shall we go to the hospital, or would you like me to call the doctor to your house?"

"I should like to go home — to the Dayal Orphanage".

"A hospital is there, I believe?"

I nodded.

She repeated the orders to the chauffeur and a few minutes later the car stood before the red brick gates of the Orphanage. I alighted and my companion too.

"It is alright", said I, "I will go now, you have been kind in giving me a lift —".

"And a dreadful bite too!" she added.

The doctor's sturdy figure stood in the postern entrance of the hospital. I tried to avoid him but he saw me.

"Miss Dutt"! he called.

I stopped. "Please go now", I whispered to my companion.

She unheeded me. "She has been bitten by my dog — please send for a doctor —".

"Keep quiet please — you seem to want the world to know of your dog's valiant deed", I said.

The doctor came towards us.

"Humph!", he exclaimed as he saw my blood-stained shoulder. He lifted the sari and surveyed the ghastly wound.

"Where have you been?", he demanded of me.

"On the banks".

"You have been bitten there".

"Yes".

"And it is your dog?", he fiercely turned on my companion and asked.

"Yes Sir. He was chained, but somehow he got loose from the man's hand".

He displayed my shoulder to her "Do you see this? — Such creatures ought to be shot".

"I am so sorry.—Please forgive me", implored my companion; the doctor ignored her and beckoned me to follow. I did so; but near the gate I glanced back to see the graceful form of my companion slowly moving towards the car. I felt very sorry as I thought it rather nice of her to have been so kind to a poor Indian girl like me, and I disliked the doctor's rudeness.

We entered the hospital; three nurses were grouped near the C. Ward but on seeing us they quickly dispersed.

One came up.

"What is Miss Garret doing here?", the doctor sternly asked her.

"She came to enquire about Borker's enema."

"There was no need for her to come here. She should have informed Miss Stuart. Get the dressings ready".

Into a chamber I followed the doctor and nurse; it was filled with a peculiar odour; here my wound was cleaned and dressed. It was done so gently yet the pain was unbearable.

"Are you giddy?" the doctor enquired.

"Yes, — a little".

"Then why don't you tell me so".

He poured a brownish liquid into a measure glass and ordered me to drink. I obeyed. It revived me a great deal and with the doctor I made for my cottage.

"Isn't it queer that I have never stepped this side during these last so many years!" he declared as we entered the cottage. The eastern window facing the Manor Hall was latticed; he opened it. "Do you close it because you dislike the aspect of Manor Hall and its occupants?" sarcastically he asked.

"No certainly not", I asserted, "I close it because of the afternoon glare —".

"But this is not noon!"

"I forgot to open it".

"You offer a very lame excuse".

He eyed the sweet peas and wild daisies which one of my pupils had arranged in the vase. "You seem to be fond of flowers and have made a very nice garden round the Orphanage which looks very pleasing now".

"I make the children do it, and it is the fruit of their labour".

He approached the chair and sat down. "Why are you standing like a guardsman? Sit down please".

I sat.

"Have you found your work harder than what you expected?"

"At first it was, but now it is pleasing to me".

"I hope you inwardly think so, and are not just saying it to please me".

"No, it is what I truly feel".

A book was lying on the table; he took it and scanned its pages. It was the English translation of the Gita.

"Are you reading this?"

I nodded.

Surprise flashed across his face.

"You are a puzzle!"

"Why?"

A gust of wind came through the window; a paper from the top of the side-board fluttered and fell at the doctor's feet; he lifted it. It was a poem I had scribbled during a melancholy mood.

"Whose verse is this?" he enquired.

I looked down "It is mine."

"You wrote it?"

"Yes".

He looked at me searchingly. "Your brain seems to be the brain of a grown-up woman, but your appearance suggests you to be a shy, childish girl. Your eyes betray away your intelligence.— But why are you sad? — Why does your face bear that peculiar expression, and now this verse also has that same sorrowful strain in it. Why is it? Does it come from some deep suffering or is it just habitual?"

"What is your idea?", I asked.

He studied my face intently. "You have suffered I think". He spoke slowly and softly. "That is why

I want to know more of you, so open yourself before me—speak”.

Instead of speaking I smiled.

“You have never worked before I presume, because you have refinement and culture and you have not that dashing, independent spirit evident in a working girl”.

“I think I have told you before, that since my parents’ death my brother has looked after me —.”

“Excuse my bad memory! I have used it for nearly forty years; age has rusted it much”. He paused, “You must be missing your brother a great deal?” he resumed.

“Yes Sir, I do”.

“Does he never write to you?”

“He does not know my whereabouts”.

“That means since coming here you have never written to him?”

I shook my head.

“And yet, you say you miss him?”

“Of course I do. I have reasons for being silent; it is not an easy task, for I would have given anything to hear some news of my brother and yet”, —I abruptly stopped.

“You must be having friends who write to you?”

“No, I have no friends”.

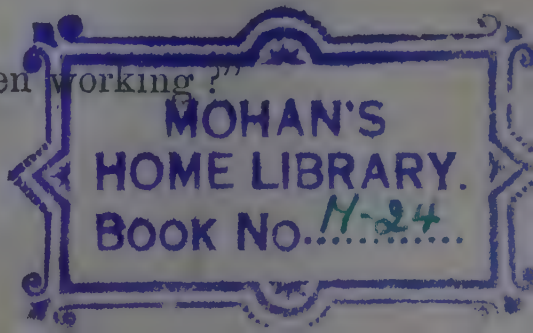
“Relatives?”

“Only my brother.”

“No uncles, cousins, aunts?”

“None”.

“How long has your brother been working?”



"Only a couple of months before my coming here."

"With whom?"

"I should like to be silent here".

"What was your father's occupation?"

"He was in the Indian Civil Service".

He was silent for some time "You think me very inquisitive and insolent don't you?" he suddenly asked.

"No Sir, you are more sympathetic than insolent. A very few employers would care to enquire whether their servants have faced difficulties".

"Ah! So you consider yourself just a paid servant?—That is why since coming here, you have always tried to avoid me. Your pride is touched. You have felt degraded because circumstances have forced you to work for wages. You felt you were not meant to do such things—yes, but I forget", he heaved a sigh. "You are a poor human—you have a susceptible mind which succumbs to joy and sorrow, to pain and suffering; we all have to yield to the fantastical moods of our fortune, but those who remain calm, serene;—they are the victors". He stooped forward and passed his finger through the thick shining mass of his hair, "What makes me talk; what inner force makes me tell you these things?"

A nurse appeared.

"May I come in?" she asked.

"Yes!—what do you want?", the doctor demanded.

"Dr. Brown has sent this note". So saying she handed a chit to him. He looked it over.

"Conduct the man to the surgery".

The nurse retreated.

"Can I keep this?", indicating my poem.

I was silent.

"That means, I can", and he shoved it into his breast pocket.

He stood up. "Don't think me mad. I may be queer, whimsical and even rude, but, like you, I have also gained it—not from sufferings.—I have gained it through handling different kinds of patients;—this mental habit has served me better than what mere outward sympathy would have done." He looked at the flowers in the vase. "Will you offer me the courtesy of a flower?".

On the door-step were baskets of geraniums and pots of red Chinese roses; near the wall a lone Niphetos bud was shyly peeping. I plucked and offered it to the doctor.

"In my button hole please", he commanded. I did so, at which he passed a careless "Thanks", and departed.

CHAPTER XI

September is ending in all its glory. It is a week since the accident. I have not seen the doctor but Miss Stuart comes in every day to attend to my wounds. Elsie Randolph has become a good friend during these six days. I have found her to be very pleasant and good natured. She told me that she parted with the dog on the same night of the accident. Life is going on smoothly.

Miss Stuart has finished the dressing and is packing the cotton, bandages, and medicine bottles into her little bag.

"Do I still have no orders to move out?" I asked.

"No, Miss Dutt, it is better you stay in. Move about the house, it will allay the stiffness but till your temperature gets normal it is not advisable for you to go out".

"But my temperature is not much!"

"It is 100 degrees but serious things can come of it — prevention is any day better than a cure".

She went to the bath-room and a little later returned rubbing her hands.

"Well, I must inform the doctor".

"About what?", I asked.

"That you have fever".

"No Miss Stuart, there is no need".

"I can't — I have orders to give him reports of all his patients. The Doctor never trusts us — no, — not even Dr. Brown".

"Is he very strict?"

"Yes, to some extent — yet I think it is the keynote of his success. He loves his work and his knowledge is enormous".

"Has he never been unsuccessful?"

"Well, I have been here these eight years but during that time I have never heard or seen one failure, and now I am so used to seeing people cured, that it has given me a sort of self confidence. Would you believe, that even lepers have been cured from here? — The doctor has a big laboratory on the top floor of his residence wherein he prepares his own formulas and serums for various diseases, and they have always been miraculously effective".

"Hello, girlie, may I come in?," and on my assent Elsie Randolph gracefully walked in. Seeing her, Miss Stuart nodded, and with a 'good evening' bustled out.

"How are you Gouri?" Elsie asked.

"I am better, sure".

"But you do look rather pale to-day — why?"

"Nothing, save a slight fever".

"And still I suppose you are worried about those kids? Why can't you take a holiday? What you need is a change — away from this humdrum life. I could never imagine myself working in an hospital or an orphanage".

"But, after all it is good work", I returned. "Here, we get an opportunity to do something for others".

"Oh! I suppose then we will go to heaven—is it not so? Poor child!" she ejaculated, and shook my chin playfully. "No, don't be angry with me. I am not such a Pagan as that; to some extent, I also agree with you—but you are unselfish, while I am not. That makes me prudent and pleasure-loving".

"You are not pleasure-loving and selfish. If you had been so, you would not have cared to befriend a poor working girl like me".

"Well! I did it because I was lonely and I seemed to like you. Just like you, I am also a working girl. I am the leading dancer of the London Wonder Follies. Now, don't look that way, I have taken it as a hobby, but I do not come from the slums as your look suggests. Well, one day I will tell you all about it".

I was silent. I was not yet so modernised to feel pride in the friendship of a dancer, and yet I conceived an immense attachment to Elsie, whose ways were much better than those of some of the so-called respectable girls whom I had seen, and she was devoid of any vulgarity whatsoever which I thought was singular in a dancer.

"Why are you silent, child? Are you going to tell me that you don't want to be my friend any more?" Elsie asked.

"No, I want to be your friend", I replied slowly, "You have been good to me".

"Then you will continue my friendship?"

"Of course—if you don't mind an unmannerly solitude-loving chum—I am not fond of balls, parties,

and society ; neither do I know perfect English nor your modern etiquette" —.

"Oh, shut up," interrupted my friend, "who says your English is bad or that you have no manners ? If I were to learn your hindoostani language and customs I would be an utter dunce at them ; so compared, your English and your manners are very up-to-date".

"Thanks for the compliment".

"Are you fond of films ?", Elsie after a pause asked ; "I was going to invite you to a very nice one which is running at the Adelphy".

"I like films", I returned. "The last, I saw ages ago", a sigh escaped me. "In the future I have very little hope of such pleasures. Those days are gone now, passed like a golden cloud".

"But why ?" Elsie with a surprise exclaimed. "Won't you come with me sometimes ?"

"I should love to" — I whispered, bent my head, and was fingering the end of my sari, "but I don't think the doctor will allow me".

"Why shouldn't he ? It is ridiculous to expect a person to be always at his beck and call. Why do you stand all this ? — You must have some recreation ; you are not old ?"

"Yes, but after all, I am, a paid servant and the doctor has been good to me. When I was homeless, a wanderer, he pitied and gave me work".

"What extraordinary thing has he done ? Any man would have done the same ! Gouri child ! You

are too innocent ; you do not know the ways of these men, and of the world”.

“No?”, I jokingly asked. “Then you are mistaken. If I were to tell you how I have suffered, the trials which I have undergone, and last of all, my escape from the very devil’s clutch, then you would marvel at my strange history. In comparison with the brutal and selfish mentality of some of the men I have met, I find the doctor far superior. Till now he has treated me as a perfect gentleman and has been always kind to me. To command is his nature, but otherwise he is sympathetic and understanding”.

“You seem to have a very good opinion about him, but somehow I can’t make myself to like him,” Elsie with a shrug of her shoulders declared. “By the way I got a letter from Papa to-day ; he wants me home for Christmas”.

“Two months more”, said I, “quite a long time”.

“Oh, but we have to yet visit Calcutta and Japan before proceeding home”.

“When you’ll be home, will you remember me?”, I asked.

“No, I am going to drag you with me. Let your doctor brawl as much as he likes. I am going to see America with you. What is this fruitless labour for? You are killing yourself”.

I looked at her and smiled.

Suddenly Elsie got up, took her hat “Well, child, I must not tire you with my chatter, otherwise the boss will not allow me to step in here. Cheerio !

Sweet Gouri, I will come to-morrow". She kissed me and departed.

I was near the western window ; the soft cool air brushed against my face while my eyes were devouring the sky's ruddy glow. A knock was heard. I turned round and saw the doctor's elegant figure.

"What are you so absorbed in — day dreams ?"

"To some extent, but I was rather enjoying the breeze".

"Miss Stuart tells me that you are having fever ?"

"Not much sir, it is just a little".

"I do not want the quantity", he paused ; surveyed the room "How are your wounds now ?"

"Quite alright, Sir".

"Have they healed ?"

"Yes, more or less".

"Well, will you allow me to sit here, and enjoy your elevating presence ?"

"Of course you can — without flattering me".

"Flatter you — and what for ? I am not a man to flatter others. I love myself too much ; besides you would be the last person whom I would try to flatter".

"All the same, too many compliments from a superior person are somewhat embarrassing to a humble person".

"Not necessarily ; this world contains all kinds of people. Some offer flattery to the person they love, others silently worship him or her, while some offer flattery as a taunt. At times, these temperaments look so alike, that only a deep close study will reveal

their difference. May I know to what particular type you belong ?”

“I would rather not reply to such a difficult question. I cannot see myself as others see me ; my judgment therefore would be very one-sided”.

“May I offer my opinion ?”

“Yes, do”.

“Well, to be frank, you appear to possess two distinct qualities like most persons, which are constantly at war with each other. One, your guardian angel ever urging you to take to the straight and virtuous path, while the other to drag you down and tempt you with lures of wealth and enjoyment. The continuous struggle between these two great forces causes great turmoil within you, but unlike the vast majority of people in your case, with the aid of good principles firmly implanted in your nature, the former is always the victor. You have pride, but instead of being a weakness, it has given you a strange valour to face and solve difficulties ; it has saved you from exigent temptations. Why do you start ? Nay, compose yourself or shall I stop ?”

“No, please continue”, I pleaded.

“I cannot ; my mood is gone. I must stop. My brief discourse seems to remind you of forgotten tortures. Your face looks all of a sudden blanched and withered. Poor child ! What must be such excruciating memories !” but suddenly his face seemed to awaken from its temporary meditative mood, and resumed its usual stern aspect. “How are your pupils progressing ?” in his usual tone he asked.

"Very well".

He bared his wrist and looked at his watch.

"Would you care to accompany me to the convalescent ward? I am taking a round there".

"I should like to".

"But I forget. You have fever".

"Please let me come", I pleaded.

He looked at me "Alright".

We went through the orphanage compound. On the northern side of the hospital was a white-washed building which we entered.

A broad veranda contained some easy-chairs. On these rested three patients. The doctor went to the nearest and bent over him and while examining his pulse and eyes conversed with him in vernacular.

"You are quite well", he told him.

"Yes, doctorsab, but still I feel very sick. Until this spirit leaves me I won't be well. I must go to the mantra-rishi, otherwise this devil will surely kill" — the man was interrupted by the doctor.

"Stop your chatter", he declared angrily. "I have removed your devil long ago; you are entirely well now".

The man shook his head. "No, I can never get well with medicine only", he cried.

The doctor studied him for a moment.

"I have made a mantra amulet for such things; it has made lots of people well and if you treasure it well, I will give it to you. Shall I?"

"Yes doctorsab, it will cure me, sure—it is the only way".

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The doctor beckoned me. "Please go to my room in Manor Hall. Do you know it?"

I nodded.

"Well, in the left-side drawer of my dressing table, you will find a small silver amulet — will you bring it, or, should I send one of the nurses?"

"No, I will bring it", and I left.

I entered Manor Hall; ascended its vault-like stairs. While passing the first floor I looked towards the room next to the one which I had occupied; Mrs. Sinha was there, reading. She did not see me as her back was in my direction.

The second floor was occupied by the doctor; his dressing room was on the eastern side; everything there was spick and span. I looked in the table drawer he had indicated and found the little amulet without any difficulty. Taking it, I quickly retraced my steps back and handed it to the doctor.

He tied the trinket on the ailing man's wrist. "Now, do not remove this", he warned.

The man surveyed the charm with a broad grin and said "No doctorsab, I will never remove it. Look, I am already better; the weight from my chest is gone. Sure it was sitting there. I knew medicine would do no good!"

The doctor heaved a sigh of relief. "Well man, do you see the magic of my mantra?"

The man nodded gratefully, while the doctor turned towards me —

"Did you notice the peculiar characteristic of the Indian villager? He will never rid himself of his

strange ideas and beliefs. This makes him one of the most difficult patients to deal with".

We were going towards the next patient when suddenly the doctor stopped and faced me — "Miss Dutt, I am entirely forgetting that you are not well yourself. Please go now, Miss Dodd will assist me".

"I am not doing anything. Can I not watch you?"

"Do as you're bid!"

CHAPTER XII.

I stared at the opening door. I was sure I had locked it securely. A white form was now visible, it entered, — nearer and nearer it approached. My heart beat faster and faster.

“Gouri !”, a low droning whisper came, “Gouri ! bid me good bye”. I thought the voice was familiar, and as the figure came before the window, the moon light fell on its wan pallid face. I recognized the person. I tried to get up but was fixed to my bed.

“Sushila, come near”, I whispered, “how did you know my address ? — How did you come — how is Mina ? Oh, tell me all, darling”.

She came, stooped over me and pressed her icy cold lips against mine. They chilled me to the marrow. “Gouri, wherever you would be, I could have found you. I am free from the cage ; my shattered body is left behind”.

“Sushila, talk sense, and not as a mad, delirious woman. Tell me, how you came here and how Mina is — quick !”

Her eyes stared widely — they frightened me.

“Your brother ; yes, your Mina ? He is dead — dead, and so am I”, she laughed hysterically, then clinging to me she screamed. “Look there, — oh look ! then call me mad”. Aghast ! I watched the black crouching figure : — its red, saucer-like eyes

sent a shiver through my body, beads of perspiration gathered on my brow:—I dared not move nor utter a sound, but the next instant Sushila's embracing arms were snatched from me and a cry escaped my lips.

I tried to get up but my effort was in vain. "Sushila", I cried. She was limp motionless in the black monster's hands. It was moving away. "Stop!", I shouted as loud as I could, "you can't take her away from me".

It stopped, turned its fearful eyes in my direction "Little mortal, struggle not in vain; time flitters fast, and thou too in this evanescent world must count thy beads with courage and righteousness".

Everything disappeared with my awakening from sleep, which I did with a start and scream. I surveyed my moon-lit chamber; it looked solemn and dreary, but hark! I heard some groans. Could they be from the hospital?—no, they are more audible.

Somebody thumps on my door "Dactorsab, wo dactorsab, —me dying with pain".

Who could it be at this time of the hour? I switched on the lights and nervously opened the door.

A semi-nude man was half reclined on the doorstep; his body was devoid of flesh and his every bone was bare to the skin, but the most astonishing thing was his abnormally large stomach. His breathing was quick and short.

"Doctorsab, I dying. I touch you feet, save me", he gasped. "I come all way from Ruikhed".

"Can you walk there?" pointing to the hospital I asked. "The doctorsab is there".

The man helplessly looked at me. "I'll try", he muttered.

"I will help you", came the familiar gruff voice close by, and the next moment the doctor stooped down before the suffering man, while I stood there, dumbfounded. "Have you a torch?" the doctor asked.

I nodded and fetched one from the cupboard. "While I carry this man, kindly show me the light", ordered the doctor.

I did so till we reached the hospital, where a small light glimmered. On hearing the doctor's heavy steps, a nurse from the opposite ward came towards us.

"Call Miss Stuart", he told her.

She went.

He then told me to open a chamber which he indicated. I put on the light, which revealed a clean, newly-made bed and a tidy, neat room; here the man was gently laid on the bed. The doctor showed me a chest from where I was told to bring out a red warm operation pyjama and coatee. These I brought, and was placing on the bedstead when Miss Stuart, dressed in her dressing gown came.

"Miss Stuart, please wake up the surgery staff and tell them to put the room in motion. This man

must be operated upon at once. Quick! and come back, I need you".

"Miss Dutt, you may go now. — You seem to have had a rather bad night". This came as another shock. How did he know of my bad night?

"Can I not help you Sir?" I asked.

"Why — you are afraid to go home alone?"

"No, but I would like to be of a little use".

"You have already been more than useful and within these few days you have become almost indispensable. Go now, don't make me talk". One by one the nurses came. The doctor said something to them—clean towels, jugs of steaming water, and basins arrived.

I yawned. The doctor's sharp eyes caught me.

"Miss David", he called the stern-looking night nurse. "Send for Mary and her bedding".

Mary arrived.

"Miss Dutt, have the goodness to retire. Mary will accompany you, and will stay for the night", he commanded.

I got up and along with Mary came to my gloomy-looking cottage.

Mary spread her bedding near the foot of my cot and was soon snoring loudly.

The doors closed and the lights switched off; I lay on bed thinking of my strange nightmare. It pained me. I recalled of having heard that the spirit of the dying often visited those for whom it had some great attachment—but I hoped not. I hoped my

Sushila was well—but could she have survived through the condition which I had last seen her in.—Three long weary years had passed since then.

‘Sushila Oh ! Poor Sushila’—my heart cried out. Another woman would have gloried in the luxury and comfort of the Jagirdar’s wealth, and prided in his evil, beastly love but then, what would have been the difference between her and a low-bred vulgar woman ? God has implanted in us, human beings, an instinctive sense to discriminate between right and wrong which is otherwise called the “moral faculty”. If owing to a long course of deliberate disuse and neglect this divine gift is allowed to become moribund, a man descends to a level even lower than that of a beast. Sushila suffered because she was human ; she had a conscience which condemned her every moment. —The consequence was her broken miserable frame. Yet I could not blame this poor innocent girl—could you reader ? How many helpless girls must be the victims of similar circumstances ? I was one of them — shy, dependent and meek, as befitted a Hindu girl who is brought up under strict conventions—but the early death of my parents left me uncared for, and unguarded ; for my brother owing to his studies had no time to look after me. This made me realise my deficiencies of character. It made me bold and gave me courage. It was this courage which helped me to face the crisis with a stern resolve and that

is why, to-day, I stood up boldly with an unblemished soul and body. I was earning my little honest bread; my hunger and thirst were eased; my body had ample clothings to cover it up; my few wants were supplied. What more could I want? Providence had been kind to me and it would indeed be sheer ingratitude if I were to grumble and growl at my condition.

CHAPTER XIII.

Morning had arrived. Mary had left with the dawn. It was the 14th of October. Washed and dressed I was ready for the school hour when I saw Miss Stuart approach.

"The doctor has sent me," she began hesitatingly. "He wants you to move into Manor Hall".

"Why? — What for?" astonished I asked.

"Miss Windsor is coming and she will be requiring this cottage".

"Who is Miss Windsor?"

"The former matron of the Orphanage".

"Where was she all these days?"

"Abroad, on a three years' furlough".

"She will be coming to resume her duties?"

"I expect so".

"And I will have to quit".

"There are no such orders".

"They will be coming".

"The doctor is incapable of any such mean action".

"Yes, and yet I am not given even a twenty-four hours notice—".

"But you will be much better off in Manor Hall", she interrupted, "and Mrs. Sinha will be delighted to have you back".

"At what time is Miss Windsor expected?"

"Ten o' clock".

"Well, it is already past nine", said I, surveying the table clock.

"I will send Azor to help you to carry your things over".

"Thanks", I murmured disdainfully.

One by one all my belongings were removed to my previously occupied apartment in Manor Hall.

"I am glad you have come back", Mrs. Sinha remarked, seeing me return.

The buxom Miss Windsor had arrived, and from the school-room I could see her flitting about the backside of the cottage. My spirits were gone. Wearily I finished my task of arithmetic; then to the gymnasium for drill and games; in half an hour they were over, and my pupils were freed for their lunch. I also came away to have mine with Mrs. Sinha.

"Why are you so dejected? Are you not well?" in the course of our conversation she asked.

"No, I am quite well".

"Or rather—you do not seem to be much pleased at coming over here".

"Of course, I am. I am only sorry for having lost my work".

"But you can help me here. To-day I have had a busy time arranging the drawing-room. I changed the old curtains to the white lace ones. They look much better with the cream pillows and the sofa coverings. How do you like the effect?"

"I have not seen it. I came through the pantry door".

Mary appeared and came to me "A missi has come to see you", she said.

"Where is she?"

"In the car, outside".

"Let her come up", said Mrs. Sinha.

"I will bring her", I interrupted.

Having washed my hands I ran out. Outside the gate, Elsie's blue car stood. She was at the wheel.

"Hellow, Gouri! What is all this hide and seek business?"

"What do you mean?"

"Here I go to your house, and am met by a plump dame who on my asking, declares that she knows nothing about you, and your whereabouts. My goodness!. It was a shock. But why have you moved from there?. The doctor's orders I suppose".

I nodded

"Why?, and who is the woman who has come there?"

"She is their former matron".

"Why did you not mention yesterday that you were to vacate the cottage?"

"I did not know it myself".

"That means that you have been informed only this morning? Oh Gouri! if I were in your place, I would not have stayed here even for a second. However can you bear it?"

"My circumstances make me do it".

"What circumstances?. Here I am pleading and begging you to come with me, but no,—you are pulling on,—degrading yourself".

I turned my face aside to hide the tears which filled my eyes.

"Chuck up the blues now and come away with me. Only this morning I received a wire from Captain Lawton, and I shall have to leave to-morrow night. Then from Bombay, we shall be sailing off straight home, as the trip to Calcutta and Japan has been dropped".

"How lovely ! You must be overjoyed at the news?"

"Of course I am, come with me now ?"

"Where ?"

"To any place which I may take you to".

"Mrs. Sinha must be waiting for you".

"Who is she and why should she wait for me ?"

"She is the doctor's mother —".

"That's enough — ! That doctor of yours and his wonderful manners, or his relatives, hold no charm for me. Now tell me, — you are coming, or not ?"

"Not to-day, Elsie, but sure, I will come to-morrow and will have tea with you".

"Only for tea !! That means you are not coming with me to Europe ? If you do not like the idea of coming as a good-for-nothing — then come as my companion, but come, please".

"I will tell you to-morrow".

"Sure ?".

"Yes".

"But you are not going to remain blue any longer ?"

"No".

"Then quick, dry up those tears and give me a smile".

I wiped my eyes and smiled.

"That is right.—Now, here is something for being a good girl", and she offered me a huge bunch of roses. I took them. "Get in now, the sun is strong", she said.

I did as I was bid while with a whir of the engine she drove away.

With the flowers I returned back to Mrs. Sinha.

"Oh, what lovely flowers !" she exclaimed. "Your friend seems to have a very good garden".

"No, she is staying in the Metropol Hotel, but she brings these flowers from the Emperor garden".

"Do they have such fine ones there? Well, I must send Azor to get some for this evening".

"Don't trouble, Mrs. Sinha, you can have these".

"No dear, you like flowers, and I am not going to deprive you of them".

"A few will suffice me. What am I to do with the whole bunch? Shall I arrange them in your room?"

"Put them in the drawing-room, please, and I would like you to be dressed in the evening".

"Are we going out?"

"Some people are coming for tea".

Evening arrived.

Dressed in a new peach-coloured cotton sari and a flushed short sleeved jacket which I had sewn during my spare time, I sat in my little room reading "The Imitation of Christ" by Thomas Kempis.

Mary appeared "Her Ladyship wants you down".

"Have the guests arrived?"

"Yes, two sabs have come, and the Rani Saheb and Rajkumari of Mena".

"Of Mena?"

"Yes".

"Is she a small tiny lady?"

"Why yes! — Do you know her?"

I shook my head. "How is the Rajkumari?"

"Very nice-looking! A worthy match for the master any day. — It is four years since we are all looking forward to the marriage".

"Does the master speak with the Rajkumari?"

"Oh, very often! I think he likes her very much".

"And yet he has not married her for these four years?"

"Well, one can never understand the master. — He is a puzzle which we dare not solve—". She paused.

"Come now, your questions will never end, and I will suffer for them".

"Alright you go, I will follow", said I.

It required some courage for me to make up my mind to go down to face the party. I wished I had accepted Elsie's invitation and now I hated myself for having refused her. I gathered up my strength and entered the drawing-room.

The first person to catch my eye was the doctor. For the first time I saw that he was dressed neatly, in a grey tweed suit. It suited him well and he looked handsomer than ever. On seeing me a smile flickered across his lips. The chairs next to him were occupied by Sir David Lester and Miss Rankin, a pleasant faced young girl.

The damask covered settee was occupied by the Rani of Mena, Mrs. Sinha and the Rajkumari, whom now I regarded with a special interest. Tall, with good features ; a rounded attractive figure, black elongated eyes and a haughty and commanding bearing she presented an entirely new picture to that of her mother, for there was not even a slight resemblance between the two except perhaps the same self-consciousness and great pride.

The Rajkumari was conversing with the heavy looking Lady Lester, but on seeing me she paused and surveyed me arrogantly.

I went up to Mrs. Sinha ; heard her utter my name.

"I had seen her some couple of years ago at the Jagirdar Sahib of Palna's palace", the Rani of Mena asserted as if to establish my unimportance and abruptly I saw Mrs. Sinha's face fall ; it became confused. — She eyed me suspiciously. I lost my nerves, my strength failed ; for a second, memories' bitter casket was opened.

Kind reader, may you never feel as I felt then, — my healing wound was pierced again, and it was bleeding. With a great effort I suppressed my feelings, smiled ; folded my hands in courtesy and occupied the chair next to Colonel Rankin whose jovial talk and pleasing manner revived me.

As Mrs. Sinha poured the tea, I served the biscuits, cakes, and sweets.

"I don't like sweets ; do you ?" the Colonel asked. I shook my head and smiled.

At last the ordeal was over. All the guests (except the Rajkumari and her mother) had departed. I also had taken the opportunity and had slipped away to my room.

Half an hour had passed when I stood at the window to survey the evening glow as was my usual habit. I carelessly looked down and saw the stalwart figure of the doctor accompanied by the Rajkumari. How striking they looked against the pretty back-ground of the fernery.

What depth of tenderness must be stirring in the doctor's mind and what ecstatic joy must be experienced by the beautiful woman who was to become his bride ; but suddenly I saw the doctor look up. — I drew back. I came and sat on the end of my bed, wondering as to what further throe I would have to undergo. I had tried to forget the Jagirdar's evil memory. I had tried to erase it out of my life but where'er I went, it haunted and relentlessly pursued me and not even the three years of hard labour could wash away the undeserved stigma which needlessly attached itself to me. My heart was in a tragic turmoil. The incident at the Jagirdar's 'At Home' stood out before me ; as a vivid memory, once more I saw Itzu Ra and her cruel gaze.

Even murderers escaped justice ; — even harlots with all their moral degradation, moved freely amongst respectability, on equal terms ; but the ill-fated with all their virtue and honour were despised for their poverty, and were pointed at, as the condemned children of God.

Dinner found me with Mrs. Sinha. The doctor had gone out. My benevolent hostess's attitude was greatly changed ; her manner towards me had become cold and indifferent.

"Why didn't you tell me that you had been with the Jagirdar of Palna ?" breaking the sombre silence she asked.

I did not answer.

"How long were you with him ?" she asked again.

"I did not stay with him. I was there with my brother who was serving the Jagirdar".

"What have you decided about your work ?" after a considerable time she asked.

"What work ?"

"You might be knowing that the doctor is to marry the Rajkumari Sudhadevi whom you saw to-day. The marriage will take place soon, and before the bride comes I would like you to be fixed up in some good post as I don't think she would appreciate your presence in this house."

I bent my head.

"I shall move out as soon as I can", I slowly replied.

"Don't misunderstand me. I am taking this attitude for your own good, as I should not like you to suffer any unpleasantness. You have been useful to me and you have served the doctor well, yet". she hesitated "you know, there are certain things in life which cannot be overlooked, and one of them is a doubtful past".

"Do you mean to say that I have one ?"

“I have nothing to say against you, but the doctor’s future mother-in-law appears very much prejudiced against you, and would not like her daughter’s would-be-husband to associate with you”.

“Thank you for telling me”, said I and we both retired to our rooms.

It was nine o’clock when I heard the doctor’s car and then his heavy steps passed the staircase. A few minutes later there was a knock at my door; on my opening, Azor told me that I was wanted in the library by the master. Should I refuse? In a second reflection I made up my mind to see him, for the last time to be in his commanding presence, his hereafter unattainable company. I ascended the stairs, through the long gallery I went and arrived before the library door. I knocked.

“Come in”, said the doctor.

I entered.

“Be seated, please”.

I silently obeyed.

“Why are you gloomy—are you not well?” after a little survey he asked.

“I am quite well, thank you”.

“Then you are upset for having left your cottage and the Orphanage?”

“Ought I to be happy over it?”

“If I were you, I would.—I would have been overjoyed at leaving a place where I had dreadful nights.—Where I was frightened”.

“What dreadful nights? Who says I was frightened?”

"Don't lie!—Then tell me, why did you scream last night?"

"I do not know. I may have done so in my sleep".

"What for? I do not think you are in the habit. — You don't scream every night, — do you?"

"I had a bad dream, Sir".

"That is better, — and you were afraid".

"Yes — a little".

"And yet you make a wry face when I force you to change your abode"—.

"Of course," I interrupted, "what else should I do? You offered me bread and honest labour. I was grateful. Yes—happy, but the same hands which watered are now slaughtering the plant, and yet you expect it to still bloom on, and offer homage to the rising sun? It cannot be".

"Don't get excited—listen. You thought it degrading to work, and I also wanted you to feel something more than a paid servant. I wanted you to feel greater, but you have misunderstood me".

"No, I have not misunderstood you. I have paid, and am still paying a heavy penalty for having misunderstood one man and I do not want to commit the same error again".

"What is all this meaningless talk? Are you off your senses?"

"No Sir, my senses are in their proper place".

"Then what is all this nonsense about penalties and errors?"

"It is hardly any use my speaking again".

"Go", he ordered, "a good rest will revive you. — You are too irritable now, and my tongue is unable to utter suitable words to please your vanity".

I got up. "May I have your leave to go out to-morrow?"

"Whereto?"

"To a friend — for tea".

"Why! I thought you said you had no friends?"

"I made some".

"Here?"

I nodded.

"When will you return?"

"At about eight".

"Till then you will be having tea?"

"No, we will talk".

"All right, you can go".

"Thank you", I returned.

I went to the door but I paused and turned towards the doctor who was still standing there. "Well —" came his retort "have you left anything unsaid?"

"Yes Sir. I want to tell you that I have found another post and shall be leaving in a day or two —".

"What?", interrupted the doctor; his face fell; he stepped forward, but I ran from the room.

"Gouri!" I heard him call. "Gouri! Come here!" but I gave a deaf ear to his summons and returned to my room, closed the door and retired to bed with a broken, weary heart.

CHAPTER XIV.

The next day arrived. The evening found me with Elsie in her charming suite at the Metropol Hotel.

"Why! haven't you brought your bag and baggage?" she asked.

"I only came for tea", I answered.

"That means you are not coming with me?"

"Of course, I am."

The tea was brought in. Elsie closely surveyed me. "Why are you so pale, child? — Are you not well?"

"Am quite well, thank you. You are always making an unnecessary fuss about me".

"Not at all! You need somebody to look after you".

"I am not a baby. Twenty long years have passed".

"That makes no difference. You are yet a child; — too innocent to face this deceiving world."

"I may have been — but I am not now. Experience has awakened — no, it has roughly shaken me out of the illusions of my childhood".

"Your case seems to be something like mine, Gouri", Elsie said pouring the tea. "Wait, let us finish tea. We will then sit in the quiet outside gallery, and I will narrate to you my surprising tale".

Tea was over. Elsie beckoned me to the tiny, circular veranda-like gallery. A servant placed two wicker chairs. We sat down.

For a considerable time, my usually jovial and talkative companion was silent and grave. She blankly looked towards the distant scenery.

"You think me happy, don't you? It is a pretence. There was a time when I was like you; innocent, trusting and guileless, but instead of making me happy, my innocence made me suffer.

"Don't look so tragic, Gouri. Listen to me with a smile. My tale may be bitter, yet it will be a warning to girls like you. Have you heard the name of the Earl of Randolph?"

"You mean the owner of Eastborne Castle?"

"The same. He is my father".

"Your father!", I ejaculated. "Do you mean that you are the Honourable Miss Elizabeth Manners?"

She nodded. "That's me! Four years ago, I was engaged to Philip Esmond. Papa was against it, and I was then just like you, — too simple-minded to understand that I was loved, only as an heiress and not for myself.

"Philip flattered me. He was a perfect and adoring gentleman. Handsome, obliging, with pleasing manners he seemed all that a girl could desire. He proposed, and in the great enthusiasm of my first love, I accepted him. The marriage hour arrived, a pale miserable-looking woman came to see me. I saw her. What do you think she revealed? She was the wife of Philip Esmond. With tears she told me of the ill-treatment she had received at the hands of her apparently sleek and polished husband.

“As soon as I came to know of it, my would-be bride-groom disappeared. Everything that was only a few minutes ago joyous and festive became suddenly gloomy and funeral. My papa cursed and swore; some guests enjoyed the fun; others pitied me. Gouri! had you been in my place how would you have felt? It was a bullet through my ignorant heart and a shock to my simple faith. I gave up attending social functions, for I hated the crowd—. It pained me when people intently questioned me about my wedding fiasco. Solitude became my sole companion. I brooded; my health rapidly gave way, and I suffered more and more mentally and bodily.

“Every day poor papa anxiously surveyed his only child. He begged me to forget the incident; to occupy my mind in something else. He, then gave me his long-asked-for consent, to appear on the stage. For two years I did theatrical work; it helped a great deal to heal my wounded heart. Then I appeared in three British films; these demanded much of my attention and had more or less revived me from semi-insane state. About this time, Captain Lawton was organising a dancing revue. I joined him. We travelled all over and were successful. The Indian trip then came. We had a very strenuous time in Bombay and Southern India, and now I wanted a rest, so I decided to take a two months holiday in some quiet, healthy place. I was suggested this, and seeing the place, I liked it and decided to come here.

“Well, Gouri, are you astonished to know my real position in life?”

“Certainly I am”.

“Do you feel ashamed of being a dancer’s friend?”

“Of course not ! but still I cannot understand how you took a fancy to a poor girl like me. It is a puzzle to me”.

She smiled. “I do not know that myself, but I believe it was the first impression which drew me to you. If any other person had been bitten that day, she would have got angry and cursed me — but you ! You only offered an anguished smile, and angelic civility. It astonished me, and I wanted to know more of you. Then in the hospital, from his manner I thought the doctor to be some relative of yours. His rudeness had hurt me much. The next day when I wrote to you, I had very little hope of a good reply — but it did come. Written in a peculiar, yet striking hand, it again established your good nature. Days passed by, you told me little things about yourself and I gathered from them, that you had also suffered. Here I saw in you, myself as I was before the shock of Philip Esmond’s deceit, and I felt that at last I had found a real companion. For those who have undergone agony of this nature can only realise what it is. Is it not so, Gouri ?”

I nodded.

“Well, let us drop the curtain now. Have you notified your doctor that you’re leaving?”

“Not yet, though I hinted to him about it”.

"Why only hinted? You should have told him straight off".

"I will tell him now".

"I must wire to Lawton to engage two passages instead of one".

"Do you mean on the steamer?"

"Yes".

"How can I manage about going to Europe? I am so ignorant, foolish, besides, I have not even decent clothes to wear".

"Oh, leave that to me child. You may be a Hindoo girl, yet to me you are, as a younger sister, and I should like you to feel the same towards me".

"It is so good of you. How in the world will I be able to repay your wonderful kindness!"

"Only by not mentioning it", remarked Elsie.

The clock chimed eight o'clock. "Is it so late?" I asked surprised how quickly the time had passed.

"Yes, it's eight o'clock", Elsie declared. "Dinner must be ready and oh! I forgot to tell you to change your sari into a nice little one which I have brought for you".

She ushered me to the dressing-room and showed me a beautiful crimson, silk-embroidered sari of some very fine material. "And this one", she said revealing another cream coloured one of the same pattern, "I have brought it for myself and you must show me how to wear it. Which colour do you like? I thought the red one will look better with your olive skin".

"But both the colours will suit you well".

"What of it? I am not going to wear saris always. I brought this just for fun". She put the yellow sari in its box. "Quick! wear this; we will be late for dinner".

"Please excuse me now. I have not told Mrs. Sinha. She will be waiting for me".

"Let her wait. — Who cares!"

"No Elsie, please let me go. It is the last night. From to-morrow I am with you till you get tired of me".

"I suppose you are anxious to say farewell to your Orphanage kiddies, the hospital staff, and your blessed doctor; are you not?"

"Of course, I am".

"What time shall I send the car for you? Will one hour be enough for you to finish your parting byes?"

"When are we leaving?"

"At 6-30 to-morrow morning".

"Send the car for me at half past nine."

"Come with your bag and baggage; no changing your mind now".

I departed and arrived at Manor Hall.

Mrs. Sinha had dined, so I took my meals alone.

Somehow, I was unhappy at the thought of leaving. Three years had sheltered me here, in peace and security; but woe to my wandering luck!

Mrs. Sinha's room was closed. I wanted to wish her good-bye and offer my humble gratitude for the kindness which she had shown me. I asked

Mary. She said, "Her ladyship would not like to be disturbed."

"Where is the master?", I asked.

"Upstairs, in the library. On his return from the hospital he enquired if you were in."

"At what time?"

"Eight".

I went to my room; packed my few things in a newly bought leather suit-case. Then I departed to the doctor's library. I knocked.

"Who is that?", came the doctor's stern demand.

"It is me, Sir — Gouri".

"Enter".

I did so.

"Well, what has brought you here?"

"I have come to bid you goodbye and thank you for all the goodness and kindness you have shown to a friendless girl".

"Anything else?"

"No, nothing".

"Where are you going?"

"To assume duties at my new post."

"You are determined to leave?"

"There is no other alternative".

"What if I make one?"

"My word is given".

"You must be very happy to leave such humiliating surroundings?"

"No, I am not, — in fact I am sorry to leave".

"Do you know what will be the condition of one man, when you leave?"

I did not understand him. I was mute.

He continued "You will be degrading him ;— taking your own words you, who have lifted him, will be dragging him down to perdition".

"I do not understand you".

"Of course you will not. — You are too innocent to know a man's deep feelings". Suddenly his face became extremely stern. "It means Gouri Dutt, you cannot go".

"Everything is settled".

A book was in his hand. He threw it on the table, got up, pushed his chair aside, and came towards me.

"Nothing is settled! Go and write a refusal to your master or mistress whoever it is".

"I cannot do it".

"Why not?"

"Because when your bride comes she will not like my presence here".

"Who has told you so, and who is my bride?"

"The Rajkumari of Mena".

He laughed.

"My little girl, what baseless information you have".

"It is not baseless Sir. I have received it from a reliable source".

"May I know the reliable source?"

This perplexed me.

"Go on, out with it", he demanded.

"Mrs. Sinha has told me Sir".

"And she has also told you that my bride will not like your presence here?"

I bent my head and kept my eyes on the mosaic-covered floor.

"Speak ! for God's sake speak !"

I did not speak.

For a moment he stood before me and then he fiercely turned towards the door.

"I will ask her", he savagely growled.

I quickly moved forward, and caught the sleeve of his coat.

"Please don't", I begged, "it will cause me greater unhappiness".

"Yes, and what about me — my life? Have you no thought for it? For years I have waited for my ideal; — a woman who would combine the East and West; who, with all her modern ideas and habits would lend them the grace and modesty of the ancient Hindu girl. I looked all over for her; sometimes I thought I had a glimpse of her, but ere I moved another step, I found myself mistaken for, either she would be too westernized or too shy and stupid. I gave up hope altogether of finding my ideal woman when, it was fated that I should save and bring an unknown wanderer home. She looked weary and travel-worn and as I carried her in my arms, dripping wet, a queer sensation came over me. I felt that something entirely new was entering my life. I left her in Manor Hall and went on my village cholera-tour.

When I returned she was better, and was given the Orphanage Matron's post for a trial. Here, this frail, shy-looking mistress's superb mode of teaching

satisfied—no, it astonished me. I was at once struck by her reserved and quiet nature, and studied her more closely whenever I got the opportunity to do. She was shy, yet she offered a bold and daring glance; she was modern in outward appearance yet there shone within her the bright star of venerable, time-honoured, civilization. I tried to see more of her but whenever she could she always avoided me. Then one day an incident took place; little by little those close petals opened and displayed the interior beauty of the flower. She became my sacred power; my holy altar, whereon I found perfect peace and happiness. Outside my work, she alone occupied my thoughts”. — He tried to shake my hands off his coat-sleeve. “Let me go”, he demanded, “I want to ask my mother as to why she wants to rob me of my only happiness”. He faced me; my eyes met his. “Gouri, I want to know why she told you all this—”.

I interrupted “She has done it for your good; she knows her son’s welfare and what is best for him”.

“Stop your philosophy and let me go”, he again angrily demanded.

“I won’t, and cannot let you go. Kill me if you like. I will not leave you unless you promise me that you will not utter,—nor question Mrs. Sinha about any such thing”.

“What if I do go and tell her? What is your delicate strength against mine! If I want to go I can”, so saying he wrenched himself free.

I stood defiant. "Go!—Give me my last parting shock. It must come. I am afraid it is fated to come. I must quietly swallow the bitter pill of anguish which you are forcing on me. Three years hard labour has earned me your mother's good will and now you want to lower me in her eyes —", but I abruptly changed my tone. I must not lose my temper; I must not get excited. "I am sorry", I commenced gently "I forgot, that I could never get rid of the disgraceful and cruel accusation ; — it is like a contagious obstinate disease, and can only be shaken off by death alone. I happen to have, not a very pleasing past, so naturally your mother resents my staying here any more, because she came to know of this only yesterday, — from the Ranisaheb of Mena. No mother would like her son to associate with a girl of a doubtful character. Mrs. Sinha has been too good to me but —", I stopped and a sigh of agony escaped my lips.

From the door the doctor had listened intently but as I stopped, he came to me and caught my hands—. "Who accuses you? Who declares your conduct is culpable? Bring the persons to me. I will deal with them."

"There is no need Sir. What is destined must happen, so what good is there in my blaming the world!"

He patted my hands —. "My poor Gouri, how sadly you seem to have been misunderstood".

"My outward appearance has deceived them".

"It could not deceive me".

"You may be mistaken".

"I never am. My judgment is always accurate".

I tried to draw my hands away.

"No Gouri, let them remain. Poor and unworthy as I am, I entreat you to accept me as your husband".

"Sir!", escaped my dumbfounded lips but he unheeded me and continued, "let me shelter you from the pitfalls and dangers of this cruel world. Queer and whimsical I may be, yet I will try to wash away sorrow and its every trace from your life. Quick! My tender flower. Say yes".

Bewildered I stared at his face.

"Gouri!" he recommenced "Gouri, why are you so terrified? Speak to me, tell me that you will accept me".

"Are you trying to mock me?"

"Mock you! What for?—You distrust my words?"

"Entirely".

"May I know why?"

"Because you are engaged to, and must marry the Rajkumari".

"Why are you harping on the Rajkumari?" he vehemently asked. "I tell you I am not engaged to her, neither will I ever be. What love or respect do I entertain for her?—She has physical attractions no doubt, but her heart is barren no light shines through the windows of her soul. She is nothing; merely a beautiful doll".

"Your mother desires you to marry her."

"May be, but I am not going to sin against my own soul just to fulfil her desire".

"There is no such thing —".

"Of course", he interrupted, "When she desires me to marry a woman just for her family and rank, while my bleeding heart will lie at the feet of another. What greater transgression could a man commit! If I marry, it will be you; otherwise, through darkness or light, through joy or sorrow, I will remain as I am, a bachelor".

"If you marry me, do you know that it will be a heart-breaking shock to your dear mother?"

"Never! If I ask her she will not go against my wish — my happiness".

"She may consent outwardly, but in her heart she will keep brooding on what she will consider a misalliance. No mother would like an ill-reputed, beggar girl to become her son's bride. — No! If I had been in her place, I would not have liked it".

There was a knock at the door. "What is it?" hoarsely the doctor asked.

"Dr. Brownsab has sent me to tell you that the A. Ward patient has been taken to the operation room".

"For heaven's sake go, I am coming", was the doctor's ferocious reply. His face was agitated and strange lustrous gleams shone from his eyes.

He studied my face. "Well?" with that penetrating, yet agonising look he asked.

"Let us bid goodbye, for we may not meet again", said I.

He left my hands.

“Never”, said he, as he bent his head, “never will I touch those hands in farewell. Offer them to me as my bride”.

He spoke with a queer gentleness which broke me down ; tears came to my eyes.

He then strode to the door but abruptly stopped and faced me.

“Gouri Dutt”, he began with a strange force, “remember you leave me here in anguish, in pain, but let me tell you that you may go even to the other end of the world, still a day will dawn when God will drag you to my side, then you will come to me with faith and trust.— You will offer your love nobly as my bride!” and with a last tragic look, he banged the door and departed.

Unhappily I gazed at the swinging door. I heard the doctor’s heavy steps descend the stairs. How I longed to call him back, to consent to become his bride. I loved him ; he understood my inner feelings ; he had offered me comfort, a home, an honourable name, and last of all his heart. They were proffered with nobility, yet I could not accept them.

Mrs. Sinha commanded my respect and I was not prepared to repay her kindness by ingratitude. She would, I knew — feel extremely degraded to have me as her daughter-in-law.

I went down-stairs, Mrs. Sinha’s room was open ; she was seated in the arm-chair and was as usual, dressed in a plain white mull sari, which made her look exquisitely divine. I entered, knelt at her side.

"What is wrong Gouri?" seeing my tearful face she asked.

"I am leaving".

"When?"

"Just now".

"You have found a good post?"

"By your blessings I have".

"What will be your duties there?"

"As a companion".

"I hope the people are nice and will treat you well".

I hid my face in her sari. "You have treated me so kindly, — you have made me forget that I was homeless and motherless. What you have done, I can never repay".

I began weeping. I hated myself for my unworthiness.

"Don't cry. You will soon get accustomed to your new surroundings. — Have you seen the master?"

"Yes, I have".

"What did he say?"

"Nothing".

"Been to the Orphanage?"

I shook my head.

"You ought to go and bid farewell to your little pupils. Better go soon, it is already late".

She wanted me to leave her. I took her hands and fervently kissed them. Once more, I looked at the dear face, but it had not been moved much, for still there lingered that indifferent, suspicious look.

Through the gloom I trodded towards the Orphanage dormitory. All the children were in bed, but on seeing me they eagerly came and confused me with questions. Why I did not come?—Why I taught them no more? etc., etc. I only answered them with a sad smile.

“Gouri!” little Janak proclaimed “take me with you”.

“Not now Janak, I will take you some other time”, returned I hoarsely.

“I don’t like the new memsab”, whispered Sita, another of my pupils.

“You must love her, for, one day she will make you all into great, clever ladies”.

“Why don’t you come and take us out?” asked Jaya.

“Because I am going away”.

“Won’t you come back?” Janak almost hysterically inquired.

I smoothed her hair “Yes, I will come back”.

“When?” they all queried.

“Soon”.

Their ayah Tulsi, was watching the proceedings with heavy, sleep-laden eyes.

“You are going away Bai”, she lazily asked.

I nodded.

“When?”

“Now”.

She folded her hands and feet.

“Yes, you do feel sorry to leave a place where you have stayed for such a long time”.

The shrill shrieks of Elsie's Motor horn sounded.

"I must go now", said I, and I freed myself from Janak's embracing hands. Each one I fondly hugged and kissed; saw them in their beds and departed to my room. Azor came and took my little bag away to put it in the car, and I with a miserable heart bade Mrs. Sinha farewell.

Almost dazed I came down and went into the pantry. Mary was there; I wished her goodbye, but she only offered me a gladdened eye. Through the pantry door I alighted in the garden.

I looked up to the doctor's room. It looked forlorn, and woefully quiet. — Only a pale ghostly light glimmered through its left window.

CHAPTER XV

Twelve months have passed since my return from England. Four happy years have I spent in the company of Elsie Randolph, who now, is happily wedded to the elegant and simple-minded Lord Owen of Hertshire.

She is still unaffected by the glamour of her greatness, and her letters to me are full of tender and deep feelings.

How considerate I thought her to be, when at the last moment she shoved a £10,000/- cheque into my bag and I can, even now, witness her beautiful figure (wrapped in that dark brown sable coat) as she stood at the Victoria Cross station to bid me adieu. Her sincere attachment to me, is yet a mystery which I am unable to solve.

How many days of pleadings and persuasion had earned me her consent to let me return back.

It was foolish of me to have left her you would say, and to some extent I also agree. I could have stayed with Lady Owen in luxury and comfort, mixed in high society, and my unhappy past would have been drowned in the waters which separated the far-away narrow-minded poverty-stricken India, but alas—I was too weak to overcome the longing for the country of my birth. I was homesick.

Now reader, a small property at Kirby is mine. It is three miles away from Oona (the place of my birth). The Rose cottage (of which I was once proud)

is in the custody of the Jagirdar of Palna (so I was told by its tenants). All the former beauty of the cottage is gone; the Jasmin creeper no more trails over its porch, while the garden beds are dry and ghostly barren. The tap is out of order and is always leaking. A large ditch has been formed by the water continuously escaping from it, making the spot a sort of nursery for the breeding of malarious mosquitoes. The baskets of Geraniums have been removed from the veranda and it is now adorned with large and small drying clothes which make it look somewhat like a washerman's abode. How I had loved this place once! It was taken away or rather wrested from me.

I asked the anaemic-looking inhabitants, if they had seen my brother the Jagirdar's secretary (described his appearance as far as I could) but the answer I got was only a stupid stare.

It is the 5th of May. A Sunday evening. I am leaning on the stone wall of the church; the bells have stopped ringing and am listening fervently to the sweet and calm music of the Choir. How peaceful it renders the atmosphere; it comes as a balm to my sorrowful heart:—

“Oft in danger oft in woe
Onward Christians onward go,
Bear the toil maintain the strife
Strengthened with the bread of life.
Let not sorrow dim your eye,
Soon shall every tear be dry;
Let not fears your cause impede,
Great your strength if great your need.

Let your drooping hearts be glad,
March in heavenly armour clad,
Fight not think the battle long,
Soon shall victory wake your song.

Onward then in battle move
More than conquerors ye shall prove ;
Though opposed by many a foe,
Onward Christians onward go”.

You will wonder as to why I was dissatisfied now — yes reader, there was no apparent cause. I was now independent without any anxiety for the morrow. Of course I could not be considered rich, but my little bank balance (Elsie's gift) was enough to suffice me for a simple living of bread and water for all the remaining days of my life and I could not but feel all unbounded gratitude towards Lady Owen. If I had not had her support I cannot imagine how appalling my state would have been. It would have been too terrible for words, and to-day I I would have been no longer on this mortal world, offering my humble prayers to God for His merciful and miraculous protection. Human beings are strange; we brood over things which are not meant for us ; like Eve we long to know the taste of the forbidden fruit which tries to tempt the evil part of our nature; for a moment we are dazzled — we forget that therein lies our downfall. But a lucky combination of circumstances hinders our chance of getting at the poisonous fruit — then in our passion and disappointment we grumble and swear, and blame the kind Master for His apparent injustice. But nay! The merciful God very often protects us against ourselves.

Through the worst storm, — through terrifying darkness the Lord always leads, His beloved ones to the land of Eternal light and glory —. Then with awakened vision we will realize the evil nature of the joys we were craving for—.

“Hello Miss Dutt”, exclaimed a voice close at hand and thus disturbed my reverie.

“Miss Stuart” ! I exclaimed at meeting the benign gaze of the Dayal hospital nurse.

“When did you come here ?”

“Why ! Am here since a fortnight ; down for a holiday, and what are you doing here ?”

“Nothing particular”.

“Where have you been all these years ?”

“Abroad”.

“In Europe ?”

“Yes”.

“That is why you are looking so splendid”.

“Am I ?”

“Certainly”.

“You went to Europe on a post ?”

“Yes, but tell me now, how is everybody at the hospital”.

“They are all O. K.”

“The doctor ?”

“Physically he is alright but mentally, he is not the same as before”.

“How is his mother ?”

“She died six months after your departure”.

“Died !”

She tragically nodded.

"Isn't the doctor married?"

"No, I do wish he would; he needs somebody's care and benign influence".

"I don't think it is possible for anybody to influence the doctor".

"Well, you can never judge a man. A woman with an intelligent brain and a kind affectionate heart can tame even the most impossible man but she must be clever and a close observer of humanity". She paused. "You know Miss Dutt, if I were to be frank, I think the doctor had a secret attachment to you".

"What makes you think so?"

"Because, since the day of your departure he has become very melancholy; all his former brightness is gone".

I tried to avoid the subject.

"How is the Orphanage?" I asked.

"Not upto the mark. Miss Windsor is not so painstaking. Last July, three kids succumbed to small-pox".

"Where was the doctor at that time?"

"Away, on his village tour".

"How is little Janak?"

"She was one of the small-pox victims".

"You mean she died?"

She nodded.

"What a shame I did not meet you earlier", she recommenced, "I am leaving to-day by the 8 o'clock mail".

"Leaving for?"

"Planta of course".

A group of ladies appeared through the Church gate.

"What is your address?" Miss Stuart asked.

"The Prairie, Lake Road".

"You are staying at the Prairie? And just fancy, we were all admiring its garden. How much rent do you pay?"

"None, it is my own".

"How lovely!—Then you are not working any more?"

I shook my head. "Not at the moment."

The ladies had come up the road now, "Come along Miss Stuart!" shouted one of them, "we're already getting late".

"Coming!" cooed Miss Stuart.

"Well, goodbye Miss Dutt", she said to me with a warm shake of hands. "I am so glad to have met you after all these days".

"Please write to me. I shall be so happy to hear from you".

"Right O!—Well, Cheerio".

"Cheerio", returned I, "hope you will have a pleasant journey".

She left me and joined the group and was soon out of sight.

A month passed when a letter from her did arrive. It set me thinking. The doctor was seriously ill with Typhoid. —Twenty-three days had passed, yet the fever continued. "We are in great anxiety", the

letter said, "In his delirium he is constantly uttering your name and twice he asked if you had come".

What should I do, I asked myself? I must go. I must do the little that I can, for him. This was the only decision I could arrive at. Two days my brain was in a tumult:—my inclination for food had gone and I moved about in a sort of dazed condition, but the third day I woke up with a strange determination to leave atonce.

I packed my trunks; told Babu (my all-round boy servant) to close the house; the cook was dismissed. The gardner was handed the charge of the house and at 9-30 I was at the station. Exactly at 10 with a shrill shriek the train moved, taking me once more to Planta and Manor Hall.

CHAPTER XVI.

On the third day I arrived at Planta and leaving my belongings at the Clymo Hotel I hurried to Manor Hall. How solitary and strange it seemed. Everywhere there was sombre silence and a hushed gloom.

"Azor! How is the master?" on seeing the old Negro I enquired, but he only offered me a tragic stare and a tear-stained face.

"Azor, what is it?" My blood had turned cold. I ran past him up the stairs, and the next instant found myself before the doctor's bed-room door. A nurse appeared from within, and looked me up and down with surprise.

"How is the doctor?" I whispered. She shook her head and screwed her lip mournfully.

"What!" I gasped and made for the door, but her detaining hand stopped me.

"I am sorry madam you cannot go in".

"But I must", said I, "I know him. I have lived here".

"But Dr. Brown and Miss Stuart are in".

"Miss Stuart is in!" and I quickly slipped past her, into my master's sick room.

The chamber was dimly lighted and I could only see the outline of three figures. I heard the low voice of Dr. Brown; then there was a stifled sob and a whispering lamentation. "Doctor, say he lives — it cannot be. Ah! Dhiren — you were great; — too

great, that is why God selfishly has taken you away from me;—Oh Doctor”—.

Aghast I stood there, rooted to the spot. It seemed as if some vampire had sucked every drop of blood from my veins. With a hoarse cry I stumbled forward.

“Doctor!” I gasped, feeling the cold and still body of my master. “Doctor!” I again frantically cried. Tears gushed down my cheeks and fell on the hand that I fondled. Life was a cruel dream—a mournful nightmare.

Gone was the only man who had understood and had once loved me with a noble affection. The benign light that had, at a critical time of my life guided and shown me the path, was extinguished. “God”—.

A hand touched my shoulder. “Please”, pleaded the hoarse voice of Dr. Brown.

“Oh Dr. Brown. Say it is not true”, I murmured between sobs. “God is not so unkind”.

For an hour I lay, crying over the body of my master. Suddenly his hand jerked.

“Dr. Brown, he lives!” I shouted, but they did not heed me, thinking that I was talking hysterically.

“Miss Stuart!”, I again cried “Look, his eyes are moving, he lives!”

Quickly they gathered around.

Dr. Brown studied my master’s pulse.

“Miss Stuart, quick—milk and warm bags!” he gasped.

Miss Stuart ran out.

I followed her and had soon returned with a cupful of luke-warm milk which little by little Dr. Brown poured in through those half-closed lips. The nurse and Miss Stuart were arranging the hot water bags, while the third, a tall well-built man slowly eyed the proceedings.

"Is there any chance?", he whispered to Dr. Brown.

"Yes Rajasab, there is every chance now. Let us see".

"God is great", returned the man.

He came towards me "Little one, may you be blessed", he murmured, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"Nay, let him be blessed", said I, looking in my master's direction. "Let God grant him life and happiness, and I have all that I desire".

CHAPTER XVII

"Gouri", came the feeble call of my master.

"Yes Sir", I ran to his side.

It was a bright morning. My master looked very beautiful as the golden rays of the sun—played through his thick ruffled hair, and formed a hallow around his face, which looked more refined and noble on account of its pallor.

I approached him.

"Who is calling for you?" he lifted one brow and asked.

"Nobody Sir".

"Yes, Miss Stuart tells me that a patient has been brought from an accident, and he is constantly calling your name".

"My name?", with astonishment I gasped.

"Maybe he is your brother; go and see him quickly, as I understand his condition is very serious".

"Shall I send for Miss Stuart?"

"What for?"

"To keep you company".

"Be good enough to leave me alone.—I mean till you return".

I went to the dispensary. Miss Stuart was there. She conducted me to the isolated wing of the D Ward, where she beckoned me into room No. 12.

Swathed in bandages was a dark, prematurely aged man. His unshaved face and that drooping

grey moustache, did not at all appear familiar to me. Quietly he lay there, looking at the roof.

"Do you know him?" Miss Stuart whispered to me.

I shook my head.

"Here is Miss Dutt", she said loudly to him.

He gave a start "Who! Gouri Dutt? No, it cannot be —".

"Yes", returned Miss Stuart "She is here".

"Am I alive", he muttered to himself "Gouri Dutt, could she have forgiven me?"

"Who?", stupefied I asked, "Jagirdar Sahib?"

"Yes Gouri", came his low hollow reply. "I am the fool who tried to play with fire. I was made to believe it was a pleasure, but I have fatally burnt and scorched myself, while those who have made me do it escaped, laughing over my stupidity. Gouri, I was not so bad, but the world made me into that brutal and selfish rotter. They flattered my vanity; they praised and worshipped my stolen wealth, and like a fool I revelled in the glory of the opulence that was not mine, forgetting, that one evil day it would pass away and once more I would become the beggar of my childhood".—

He stretched out his hand. "Gouri, sit near me, your presence is so soothing. Let this wretched soul lighten his burden, at least for a short time".

"Jagirdar Sahib", I pleaded, "Please don't —. You are too weak and must not exhaust yourself", perspiration had wetted his face; I wiped it.

"What matters exhaustion now! Till I can, let me talk; it relieves me!"

"Oh, forget it all now. Begin again as a new and a really good man", whispered I, patting his thin bony hand.

"You have the heart of gold, but I have realised its value too late. To me, then, there was nothing more valuable than money. I thought it could buy my every whim and desire, but you alone defied me. One warm breezeless night you left all the luxury and comfort of my dwelling. I don't know where you had wandered and disappeared, but it made me wild. I wanted you all the more, because you were the first to spurn my grandeur, and insult my wealth. In rage the very next morning I drove your brother —."

"Who, Mina?"

"Yes".

"Where?"

"Away from my house".

"Where is he now?"

"He had gone to Egypt with Itzu Ra, and later I heard that he had died there".

"Mina! poor Mina!" were the only heartstrung words that escaped my almost frozen lips.

"Gouri, don't look that way. It hurts me. I have wronged you.— I have rebelled against the laws of God and man, and am now reaping its punishment. This agonising mental torment is much greater than poverty or any bodily pain".

"Jagirdar Sahib", I slowly called; "where is Sushila Sen?"

"Who, Sushila!" he gasped, "Poor girl, she died four years ago—". His body shivered. "How she haunts me with those ghastly tragic eyes!" he murmured to himself. "Gouri", he continued, "why are you silent? Say a kind word to a suffering soul. I know, I am not worthy of it—". A fit of coughing seized him. His voice became very low and hardly audible. "Ah—ah—give me something, ah—to drink, there's something in my throat. Ah!"

"Jagirdarsahib"—

He became suddenly still, and did not respond to the efforts of Miss Stuart to put some water into his mouth.

"Jagirdarsahib", I excitedly called.

He had become rigid; his eyes stared vacantly.

"Miss Stuart", I inquired amidst sobs "What has happened?"

"It was expected Miss Dutt. It was a bad case of consumption".

His cold icy hand was still clasped in mine. I looked at the wasted and deceased frame of the Jagirdar. What had become of all his wealth?—What a strange tragic fate! The flame that flickered ere only a second ago was blown away by the powerful wind of death. I had left this man's hospitality, in hatred and abhorrence, but now I looked at his pitiful countenance with no other emotion than a strange tenderness.

At five, the last ritual ceremony was over, and mournfully I returned back to my master. He was

standing before the large French window but on hearing my step he turned.

"Gouri Dutt, you have been crying. What is wrong?" he asked.

"He is dead, Sir".

"Who — your brother?"

"My brother is dead, but to-day the Jagirdar of Palna died—".

"Palna!", he gasped, "what do you mean?". Tears gathered in his eyes. "Chandrakant", he murmured, "Poor Chandrakant! I never did mean to deprive you of your belongings —".

He was interrupted by Azor. "Sir, a leper woman has come and wants to know if anybody by the name of Chandroo Gaikwad has come here".

The doctor turned. "Gouri quick! See who it is, — may be she is his wife, mother or sister".

I ran down the stairs into the front hall. A middle-sized woman stood in the balcony of the veranda looking in the direction of the hospital. I placed a hand on her back; she started and turned; for a brief second our eyes met — "Maisahib —", I exclaimed in amazement. She looked bewildered, but suddenly her face fell and quick as lightning she darted from the veranda.

"Maisahib", I called pathetically, "Please come. — Wait", but she turned a deaf ear to all my entreaties and ran on. Again and again I called, following her till she was out of sight. The people on the road gaped at me thinking I was a mad woman. After a last futile attempt, I returned with a queer

unhinged state of mind, while physically I was too fatigued and weary to lift my limbs.

On my entering the chamber, "Who is it?" the doctor asked.

I stood with a bent head.

"Gouri Dutt, who is it?" he insistently repeated again.

"It was his mother, Sir"

"Then where is she?"

"She is gone. — On seeing me she fled".

"Did you not try to detain her?"

"I did Sir. I went right upto the post-office calling for her".

"Poor woman! she must have felt ashamed", he said sadly. Then his face changed. Gone was that look of tenderness, but in its place came a fierce bitterness. "Yes, but what about the woman whose whole life she had made like a barren scorched tree? — She had robbed her of every happiness. — Poor mother! How bravely, and nobly you suffered". He looked at me "Gouri Dutt, it is the justice of God".

"Yes, Sir", I returned, overcome with tears.

Perplexed he stared. "Does the Jagirdar's death mean such a great loss to you?"

"No Sir".

"Gouri Dutt you are lying, because your very appearance contradicts your words".

"Sir", I began, "if one day you had been a great man, and if you had lost all those riches; how would you have felt? Humanity forces me to pity such downfall".

"Yes, to-day humanity has brought tears to your eyes, but there was a day, when the same humanity could not melt your stony heart, when you left an anguished, imploring man to his fate. Had you any humanity then? Worldly greatness is never to be relied upon, and there is no greater fool than the person who thinks it everlasting". He came and sat down. "Will you have the goodness to serve the tea".

I poured out a cup and along with the biscuits, arranged the tray near him. "And where is your cup?" he enquired.

"I don't want any", said I, and was going towards the door.

"Gouri Dutt, where are you going?"

"Downstairs".

"I forbid you to go".

I turned round and stood there looking straight at him. He got up and approached me. "I am not yet strong enough; otherwise I would have given you a thoroughly good shaking".

Then his voice became soft and tender.

"Be patient Gouri. I am sorry if I have angered you, but if you could but just imagine the state of my mind — then you would feel sorry for me".

He led me to a chair; made another cup of tea and handed it to me "Drink", he ordered, "it is already cold".

I finished the tea and the biscuit which he forced me to eat. Then he rang the bell and ordered Azor, who appeared in response, to take the tray away.

Then, "Gouri", he called affectionately, "forgive me—will you?"

He paused. "No, there is still fire in those eyes. Alright, I will tell you something;—something that you don't know, and yet would be interested to know. Go and lift that curtain from that portrait", he declared pointing to a huge red velvet-covered picture.

I lifted the heavy covering.

"Do you know whose portrait it is?"

"Yes, the Jagirdar's father's", exclaimed I.

"You are mistaken, or misinformed Gouri Dutt, for it is the portrait of my father—".

"Your father!", I ejaculated. "Then you are the brother of the Jagirdar?"

"No, I am neither his brother nor his relative and I will tell you the strange tale of our lives; so come and sit near me, for I do not want the whole world to hear me".

I looked at the clock; it was nearing six.

"Wait Sir", I interrupted "you have forgotten your medicine".

I poured one dose in the measure-glass and handed it to him; he gulped it and returned the empty glass with a grateful 'thanks'. Perspiration had gathered on his brow.

"Fortytwo years ago the princess Padmajaraja of Satyapur was given in marriage to the Jagirdar Debendranath Sinha of Palna. Three years after the wedding a son was born. Five blissful summers had passed; it was nearing Dussera and the princess

had come to Satyapur for the festival. One day a lean ragged woman sought the princess' darsan and in the princess' presence she poured forth a woeful tale of a drunkard, brutal husband who she said had driven her out of the house, and she was wandering about for two whole days without a single morsel of food. The princess' heart melted and she kept the woman and her noisy four years old son. The nine days of Dussera were over and the princess, her son, along with the new-found clever maid, returned to Oona, the Jagirdar's permanent residence.

"But here the maid's ways changed. From that humble, shy-looking creature, she turned into a bold, intriguing woman. She pursued the presence of the Jagirdar, and little by little began to use all her wiles to make an impression on him. At first he was indifferent, but slowly he began to succumb to her cunning ways. He thought her something new and fresh, and from the mistress, his affection was gradually transferred to the maid; her word became law, and she began to show her mistress that she was no more a servant, but her equal in the house. The princess could bear it no longer and with a cold harsh farewell she returned with her son to her father.

"Years passed by. The Jagirdar seemed to have forgotten the existence of his wedded wife and child. The boy had now grown up into a young man. He went abroad to finish his education; passed M. D. and became a fellow of the Royal College of Sur-

geons. Then came the war in all its grimness. He took an active part in it, and served on the hospital-ship "Guildford Castle", before it was torpedoed in the Bristol Channel. At the end of the war he was given the Victoria Cross". He paused; looked searching at my face. "After the war he returned to his mother-country, and his mother. He went to see his father who received him well, and spoke to him kindly. For a moment he seemed to repent; as if he wanted to be reconciled to his son, and he looked proudly on the son whom he had almost forgotten.

"Dhiren, ask your mother to forgive me", he murmured pathetically.

"A woman all the time stood at the back door and watched this affecting scene: this meeting between the father and the son long separated, owing to her wicked machinations. As the son was leaving, a young, well-dressed man, with a neatly pointed moustache and a handsome face came up. "Father", said he, "mother is calling you".

"Yes yes, tell her I am coming", returned the Jagirdar absent-mindedly.

"That very night the hale and hearty father of Dhirendaranath Sinha died. My heart cried for revenge, but nay, my mother prevented me. She did not want to degrade herself—she was proud, Gouri,—very proud of her royal blood. Little by little I forgot all. I occupied myself with medical research work; opened a hospital, and installed a laboratory for experimenting on the various serums.

Eight years hard work found me very successful ; it was at this time that you came, and from your very appearance I knew that you were not what mother thought you to be"—.

"What do you mean, Sir?" I interrupted.

"Gouri Dutt, I know your identity. I know that you are the daughter of the Honourable Justice Sir Bhupendranath Dutt —".

"But how did you come to know it sir?"

"By the history of "Rose Cottage" your ancestral house which is in my possession now. Gouri Dutt, don't look so wretched. It is not mine but yours;— my bride's. Will you now say yes?"

"But first finish the tale".

"Not unless I have the end to it, so Gouri Dutt, I ask you. Will you now consent to be my bride?"

I bent my head. "Yes, Sir I will".

"Sure?"

I returned a shy smile.

"Then do not address me Sir sir, it is so embarrassing to hear your repeating it after every syllable. Well,—where did I stop? Yes,—after you left, my mother died. Two years passed, when letters from my father's legal adviser began to come. At first I could not quite understand what he was after; the income from Satyapur was more than enough for me. My mother was dead, I had nobody in the world for whose sake I should go messing about a court for my rights. Those letters were torn and thrown in the waste-paper-basket. Then one day my grand-father received a big registered parcel.

It contained the real will, and all the legal papers of my father, but the most sensational thing therein, was the confession letter of my father's solicitor who declared that the will which had been produced before was a forged one; the next day's papers were full of the tragic account of this well-known man's suicide".

"But could a Jagiri be bequeathed to any outsider?"

"It was no Jagiri. Everything was self-acquired and 'Jagirdar', was only a courteous way of address", he became meditatively silent.

"Then what happened?"

"Ah! Yes.—Then against my wishes, my grandfather produced those papers in court—everybody was dumbfounded; the man who had posed as the Jagirdar was charged with fraud and forgery, and I do not know what subsequently happened to him, but the estate that I never wanted, was forced on me. Well Gouri Dutt, what are the thoughts behind those unfathomable eyes of yours? Your changing expressions are very confusing and unreadable. Tell me—do you pity, or hate me?"

"I neither pity nor hate you".

"Then?"

"It is time for your milk", said I in order to change the subject.

"What is the time?", he enquired.

"Six thirty".

I switched on the light.

"Have you sent the wire to Satyapur?"

"Yes, I sent it this morning".

"What is the wording?"

"Doing well, no anxiety".

"Well, write another".

"Now?"

"Yes;—Come immediately, happy news".

I wrote and handed it to Azor.

Miss Stuart came to enquire after the doctor's health.

"Miss Stuart", the first time I heard him call her in such a gay manner, "let me introduce you to my fiancée", pointing to me.

"Yes!" gasped Miss Stuart, "I congratulate you Sir".

"Thank you Miss Stuart".

"Miss Dutt", she said "I hope you will be very happy", then she whispered aside "You are very very lucky". Then loudly, "But I don't think she has had any lunch to-day Sir—".

"No!" anxiously he returned. "Then quick Miss Stuart, tell Azor to serve dinner atonce, I am both, very hungry and happy".

After the departure of Miss Stuart he said, "Gouri, you are very naughty, and I ought to thrash you for going about without your lunch or do you plead in defence that it is my fault for keeping you so occupied? You must not forget that I am a convalescent, and it is not my duty to enquire whether my nurse has had her breakfast, lunch, tea etc., besides, you must also consider my weakened memory".

Dinner was served. The doctor carefully watched me, and pressed me to eat something or the other

and all the while kept on fussing over me as if I were a child.

After it was over, I handed him his medicine and a cardium, and as usual asked his leave.

"My selfish nature would like you to stay for some time but nay, my delicate flower, you must be weary and tired after the day's tragic and exciting incidents. Go and rest your poor brain and body".

He smoothed and pushed back the hair from my face and lifted it.

"May God help me to make you happy", he murmured to himself.

"Good night", said I.

"Good night", he returned softly.

As usual the doctor's Buick car dropped me at the hotel and soon I found myself dreaming away in my little room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

There was no ceremonious grandeur; it was a simple quiet wedding. The Maharaja of Satyapur, (my husband's grand-father) along with some lady guests attended it. The former had taken a great liking to me and one quiet evening, on hearing from my husband my past history, and how, and under what circumstances I met him, he said after a pause, "Dhiren you have a great woman as your bride:—she has given you a new life". There was a touch of reverence in his voice.

"Come", he spoke to me "let me bless you".

I approached and knelt before him; he placed his hands on my head and closed his eyes in meditation.

The next day they all departed to Satyapur and for the first time I found myself in Manor Hall as the bride of the doctor. The strain of excitement had greatly exhausted him, and for the first few days he was mostly confined to bed but little by little he began to improve in health.

Three years have passed. My husband is again taking the same keen interest in his medical work. I have never seen him so gay, and I myself at last have reached the safe haven of absolute contentment and happiness. My once torn heart is now completely healed, and swells with gratitude towards the Almighty, for He has given me a reward much greater than my sufferings.

How often do I think that if every woman had a husband like mine there would have been much fewer marriage tragedies in the world, and it would have been no difficult task at all for wives to love and worship their lords and masters. Love and worship will only come when your heart is filled with genuine respect and admiration, and this respect is the keynote to married bliss. My husband has always commanded my reverence. I idolise him. We are great pals — our interests are one and day by day our attachment instead of wearing out is growing stronger and stronger. It is bringing us each moment a step nearer to our great goal; eternal union of two loving souls. How kind Providence has been.!

Now reader, a few words about the others whose names have appeared in this narrative. Maisaheb after that incident, was never seen again and I have no idea as to what may have happened to her; if she has ever come to know of the tragic death of her son. Poor woman! — Whatever she may have been or done yet today, how great her agonies must have been. How severe is the punishment of God to those who err.

The news about Minanath's death was a fact. He had gone to Baghdad with Itzu Ra and there he died of sunstroke. He was one of the many who were ruined by the Jagirdar's sweet and seductive promises. Mina must have given up his last breath in anguish, without anybody to soothe and solace his last hour, but past Karma had his pitiless revenge.

Alas! the predestined must happen to vindicate the irrevocability of Fate.

The Princess of Mena — against the wish of her parents, married the Nawab of a certain state and they have now settled down in Paris.

The only one who is still the same is Itzu Ra. She is still going on with her fast life and her daring flirtations. Her income from Egypt has been stopped and she is now openly staying with Raja Madanrai, a shameless vagabond. Elsie still writes and is — but hark! here are my husband's footsteps as he returns from the surgery.

"Gouri!" he comes calling and his massive form appears in the door way. "What are you doing?"

"Writing".

"To whom?"

"Guess!"

He approached and scanned the papers "What is it, Gouri?"

"Our life".

"You are writing it?"

"I have finished it."

"Yes? and this must be what you have ended it with —. That you are very unhappy with a brutal and savage husband!"

"No, I have ended it with being exceedingly happy with the dearest husband in the world."

He took my face in his hands. "Gouri, to-day I am really happy, because for the first time your eyes and lips have spoken in unison. Your expression

has not puzzled me;—it has fully endorsed the words that escaped your mouth”

I interrupted—.

“Come my master, the dinner is ready and you must be tired and weary —.”

“A smile and a sweet word from you is enough to drive away my fatigue, and I do not know how I should thank the Merciful Lord for having given me such a great woman as my bride. Come Gouri Sinha, to-day is the last day of the year and also the last day of all our troubles”.

And we laughed aloud, like two overjoyed children.

